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10

**THE
IDEAL
SPONGER
LIFE**





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TO CONVINCE A SPONGER

Princess Freya and Zenjirou are together to negotiate for some magic tools. Their negotiation partner? Crown Prince Josep.

Freya manages to buy a tool for water purification. The prince then even allows her to enter negotiations with other noble families to buy magic tools those families possess. Several days later, Freya finds herself negotiating with Lucretia's relatives, the Broglie Family. Lucretia's father presents her with the powerful magic tool known as "the Lulled Sea."

His condition for the gift is that it be considered "a symbol of friendship between the Twin Kingdoms and Uppasala."

Moreover, they ask for some advice for Lucretia, who is aiming to become Zenjirou's concubine. Princess Freya offers the younger girl some advice based on her own success, but...



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Prologue — Time with His Son

“Papa’s here, Zenkichi.”

Zenjirou was currently in a room of the inner palace with his beloved son, Carlos Zenkichi, in his arms.

There was a soft smile on his face. He was swaying back and forth using himself as a rocking chair as he stared happily down at his child. The slightly dopey smile on his face coupled with the rest of his behavior put him a hair’s breadth from real “baby-brain.”

“You’re so big now.”

The words were not one hundred percent accurate. Of course, Zenkichi had only been born a year and two months ago, so he was in the middle of a rapid period of growth. However, it had only been a day since the last time Zenjirou had held him. No growth would be quick enough to perceive in *that* short a time period.

“You’re so big now, Zenkichi.”

There was an extremely simple reason this was all Zenjirou was saying. “You’re so big now” was the second phrase he had been given permission to use in front of his son. With automatic translation through the soul of language being a fact of life, it was important for a child to hear as little of any other language as possible until they had a good grounding in their mother tongue. The mother tongue for Capua was common to the west of the continent and the two phrases Zenjirou could properly pronounce were “Papa’s here” and “You’re so big now,” learned in that order.

The prioritization of his learning *definitely* showed the signs of baby-brain as well. Regardless, he used the two phrases he was permitted to show as much love as he could to his young son.

“Papa’s here, Zenkichi. You’re so big now.”

While it was still early in the morning, it was still the blazing season. The

supply of ice to the room was being kept to a minimum to acclimate Carlos to the Capuan climate, so the temperature was already over thirty degrees. Even so, Zenjirou didn't feel the slightest hint of discomfort.

However, his son did not necessarily feel the same way.

"Uhh...uuhh, wahh."

Despite the pleasant rocking, the gradual increase in temperature and being held inevitably made the infant start fretting.

"Sir Zenjirou, could you return Prince Carlos soon?" Cassandra, the child's wet nurse, asked softly, picking up on the child's shifting emotions.

Zenjirou was about to reply in agreement in Japanese but barely managed to swallow his words. Instead, he nodded and put Carlos back into the crib with familiar movements. Then, he moved closer to Cassandra and spoke quietly to prevent the young prince from being able to hear.

"I leave the rest to you," he said.

The middle-aged woman gave a comforting smile. "I understand, sir."

Her smile soothed him somewhat, and although he didn't wish to leave, he stepped out of the bedroom. Once he had left, he began to walk down the corridors.

"Oof, it's as hot as ever in here," he commented to himself. "The season'll be over in about a month, though."

The temperature was so hot that it felt almost impossible to get enough oxygen. Regardless of how used to it he should have been by then, he couldn't contain the complaint. In truth, with the lack of ice in Zenkichi's room, the temperature should have been the same there too. The very fact that he could hold his warm son without feeling the heat, only to be overwhelmed by it as soon as he left, showed how unreliable his sense of temperature was.

Still, he picked up his pace to escape the heat, returning to the center of his daily life—the living room. Ines and several of the young maids were on duty inside.

"Welcome home, Sir Zenjirou," Ines greeted him.

“Thanks. Is Aura in the bedroom?” he asked.

“She is indeed.”

Zenjirou didn’t stop moving as he spoke, walking straight through the living room towards the bedroom. He carefully opened the door, trying to keep the cold in as much as possible as he slipped through. The door was immediately closed behind him.

“Phew, I’m alive again,” he muttered. The air conditioning was on full blast, keeping the temperature below twenty-five degrees. He gulped in the air in relief.

“The heat must have been exhausting,” Aura commented lightly as he wiped the sweat off. “Was Carlos well?”

The queen was wearing a loose dress as she reclined in a chair. Her hair was unbound, and she was dressed very much in a relaxed way. However, the sheaf of official drake parchment in her hand showed that she had not completely escaped the weight of the crown.

Zenjirou perched himself on the end of the bed. As he did, he used the cloth from the maid at Aura’s side to mop his brow.

“Yeah, he’s the same as always. The temperature’s still high, though, so he got kinda sulky after just a little bit of cuddling.”

That was a lie. Well, from Zenjirou’s perspective, it was completely honest. However, the words were not *objectively* true. The period Zenjirou had been holding Zenkichi for was by no means “a little bit.” Even well-trained dogs in a dog café would eventually bite the hand holding them if they were held for too long. Zenjirou had been holding his son for a similar amount of time.

Since she had been waiting alone in the bedroom for the entire time he was gone, Aura was all too aware of that. Casting her eyes to the clock in the corner, she gave him a fond, if somewhat rueful, smile.

“I see. Well, do not let it get to you too deeply. It would appear I was correct to stay, though. I would have wanted to hold him for just as long if I were able.”

As she spoke, Aura handed off the sheet of drake parchment to the maid

behind her.

“Your health’s the most important thing right now,” Zenjirou said. “You should stay in the cool air as much as possible.”

She could deal with any paperwork here, but the royal palace was the only location she could carry out her required meetings. In addition to needing to maintain any stamina she could with her pregnancy, Aura was spending as much time as possible in the inner palace in the air-conditioned room.

“How’s *this* one doing?” Zenjirou asked. He’d wiped any sweat off his hands before softly putting his right hand on the swell of her stomach.

She relaxed slightly at his touch and smiled gently. “According to Doctor Michel, very well indeed. Personally, I have suffered much less sickness than with Carlos—practically none, in fact—so I am all the more nervous.”

As she spoke, Aura put her own hand atop his while he gently caressed hers.

“You just need to wait a little longer. Then I’ll have gotten us a healer from the Twin Kingdoms. At that point, things should ease off slightly.”

The healing magic the Gilbelle family commanded was practically foul play in this world. Even if the pregnancy faltered somewhat, they could use their personal magics to heal the woman in a moment. That would mean that Aura could relax more than she currently could.

She nodded happily but then realized something. “Now that I think about it, there is a detoxification spell that falls under their domain. If I had a healer at my side ready to cast it before I absorbed any alcohol, then—”

“Aura,” Zenjirou said sharply. It wasn’t often he raised his voice like that, but his wife was being stubborn.

“Hmph...” She likely knew she shouldn’t have said it. She hunched over slightly and looked up through her lashes at him. “I cannot?”

“That’s not up to me. You should ask Doctor Michel later.”

“Hmph, that means essentially the same.” She pouted.

When it came to matters of health, not even the monarch could gainsay Aura’s attending physician. The likelihood of him allowing alcohol while she was

pregnant was zero. A modern doctor in Japan might allow very restricted consumption of alcohol if they decided that the mental stress of abstinence was too high. However, the doctors of this world, like Michel, would not. Alcohol during pregnancy was forbidden. Without question. That was his decision.

“I shall have to abstain for quite a while, then. A child is very welcome, but no less hard for it,” she sighed.

“I know you like to have a drink, but I don’t think you were as focused on it with Zenkichi,” Zenjirou remarked, looking askance at her.

“Indeed. The sickness was ongoing for so long and the changes to my senses were such that I did not truly desire it. Fortunately, the sickness has been much lighter this time, and my senses have not changed enough to notice.”

“I see, so while your sense of taste hasn’t changed, you still can’t have the alcohol that you’d enjoy.”

Aura shrugged wordlessly, then changed topic. “Something like that. The air conditioning has made my appetite last despite the heat, though, so it has not been a major issue.”

While Capuans were used to the heat, there were still limits. Even they grew tired of the heat of the blazing season, in spite of having been born and bred in the region. This meant that it was all too common for their appetites to wane with the increasing heat, so all that passed through their throats was water and booze.

Zenjirou certainly found alcohol—particularly ice-cold beer—to be a pleasant drink when it was hot. However, when it got *too* hot, he didn’t like to drink. The Capuans simply had a higher limit before that became the case, though, being more used to the heat.

Regardless, the effort of bringing and setting up all the electronics felt worth it when Aura told him it had kept her appetite up during her pregnancy.

“In which case, you’ll just have to make up for the lack of booze with good food. You don’t have too many limits on what you can eat, right?”

“Indeed. I suppose I should take advantage of the situation and order a variety of things. Do you have any rarer items you would recommend?”

Having come from another world, Zenjirou had brought culinary knowledge—so far centering around things like ice cream and cake—to Capua. That series of events had set Aura’s expectations high. After a period of thought, Zenjirou answered confidently.

“Quite a lot. Nicolai’s efforts with the goats have gotten the milk to a drinkable state and they’ve started making butter and cream. There are plenty of snacks we can ask for that use those ingredients. Oh, there’s also fresh cheese made using the milk and some citrus fruit juices. They’re still testing things out, but they’re all tasty.”

It was oddly assertive for Zenjirou, so Aura was clearly taken aback. “Hm, I see. No, I would rather try them when my body is in a stronger state.”

Her reaction was not as he had hoped but was what he had expected. He gave a reluctant smile. “No dairy, then?”

“Indeed. However it tastes, I instinctively want to avoid it,” she replied, arms raised slightly in surrender.

It was honestly not a surprise. The main form of livestock on the Southern Continent was reptilian in nature. Being reptilian, they did not produce milk, which meant that the people of the continent didn’t have any practice of consuming milk from livestock. The young maids may have been slightly more flexible in their views and were happy to have the snacks made of butter and fresh cream, but people like Aura, who were reluctant to try such new things, were by no means rare.

“That’s a shame. Oh well, though.”

He had been looking forward to dairy products and had wanted to share the joy with his wife. While he was unhappy that he could not, luxury foods were not supposed to be *endured*. If she could muster the courage after their child was born and she had recovered, then that was fine. However, if she forced herself to try it in her current condition, it could very well make her ill.

“That makes trying anything new harder, then. Do you have any preferences?”

“Well, less so when I am shut up in the room like this, but I crave shaved ice

while in the royal palace.”

“That makes sense. Too much is still bad for you, but a cup a day would be fine. What would you have it flavored with? Jam? Just sugar?”

The syrups from Japan had long since been finished. Aura put on a casual air as she answered his question.

“Hmm. Well, I enjoy all flavors, but my favorite would be brandy, followed by whisky. I believe you should have some of the latter left, no?”

“Aura,” he said sharply again, forcing himself to scold her as she kept looking for alcohol.

Chapter 1 — Princess Freya's Crisis

Zenjirou had adjusted his schedule to prepare for his return to the Twin Kingdoms. It was currently afternoon as he reclined in a wicker chair. Their bedroom had started to pull double duty as Aura's office now.

He tilted his head in response to his wife's statement. "Princess Freya is requesting relief?"

Aura nodded with a conflicted look. "Indeed, though I am unsure whether to call it a request for relief or surrendering to the heat. She *is* someone whom not even I can curtly refuse, though, so I decided to consult you."

"Ah, I see."

The comment gave Zenjirou a good idea of the situation. He remembered a letter asking if they could give Freya some ice due to her struggles while he was in the Twin Kingdoms. He'd given permission as soon as he'd returned... Had that not worked?

"Didn't we provide ice since she was suffering so much with the heat? Did that not fix it?"

The queen gave a slight sigh at the question. "In one respect, that was a bad move. The periodic deliveries allowed her to regain her stamina and appetite and therefore realize what it implied: there is somewhere in the inner palace where it is possible to make ice. So she then requested at least temporary refuge in that place."

"Ah, that's how it went."

Zenjirou had a fleeting image of Freya crouched in the freezer, but that wasn't what she was asking for. She was likely envisioning a room where ice could either be created or maintained—like an ice house—within the inner palace and requesting its use as a retreat.

They could hardly put the princess in the freezer, but allowing her into the air-conditioned bedroom would also answer her pleas.

“Would letting a princess into the inner palace cause any issues, though?”

As far as Capua and the princess herself were concerned, she would officially be Zenjirou’s concubine. However, none of that had been discussed with her family—the Uppasalan royal family.

Aura inhaled deeply, allowing her generous bust to rise, before answering his concerns.

“Many. Frankly, it is out of the question.”

“Hey,” Zenjirou protested with half-lidded eyes at the conversation being cut down.

She seemed to have expected his response because she just kept a soft smile on her face as she continued. “Therefore, she will not be granted entry on this occasion. I have thought of two solutions. The first is to move Her Highness to the smallest and closest room to the inner palace. The ice could then be provided as soon as it was created and therefore decrease the temperature considerably.”

“Ah, the same way we did for Zenkichi’s room,” he said, punching a hand in understanding.

Freya was currently staying in a separate building for guests, far from the center of the palace. They could deliver ice there, but the heat of the season meant that it would melt considerably on the way. It was relatively public as well, so they could not provide ice too frequently. Moving her close to the inner palace would drastically increase the effectiveness of the chore. A small room might be possible to maintain below thirty degrees.

He understood Aura’s plan, but he still had his doubts. “That’d be less of a problem than having her in the inner palace, but still, is it a good idea? Those rooms aren’t the best, are they? Will having a foreign princess sleep so close to the entrance to the inner palace cause issues?”

Aura frowned. “It is far from ideal. It is a suggestion that barely satisfies as a compromise. I have had Doctor Michel examine her and she is in a rather bad state. In the worst case, her life could even be in danger.”

Naturally, that was an extremely low possibility. Heat fatigue for a prolonged

period, coupled with a lack of nutrition, could certainly make possible illnesses life-threatening. While the probability was certainly low, exposing a foreign dignitary—to say nothing of a future concubine and the princess of an influential trading partner—to such pointless danger was less than ideal, particularly if there were ways to address it.

“Got it. I’ve got no real objections, then. What was the other option?” Having come to agree with her, Zenjirou prompted her to continue.

“My other solution would involve a request from you. The magic tools of the Sharou family. As you have observed, the country has magic tools that provide cool air. I would have you buy a set.”

Her statement reminded him of those tools. The Purple Egg Palace was indeed replete with the tools that had made it a much more comfortable environment. While it wasn’t on the same level as an air-conditioned room, it lowered the temperature enough to be unremarkable for day-to-day life.

He wasn’t sure whether it would work in the same way as in the desert country for the more rainforest-type climate that Capua had, but it should still make a big difference.

“Got it, I’ll do that. Why has no one else in the country bought them before since they’re so convenient?”

The question was an obvious one to ask, and the queen gave a reluctant smile as she answered. “Magic tools are ridiculously expensive. While the heat of the blazing season is an ordeal even for us, it becomes the norm as you live through it. It is something you can survive, so most people decide to grin and bear it.”

“I see; sort of a case of just living with it.”

People would only miss air conditioning if they’d once had it. A native Capuan might find the blazing season an ordeal, but it was bearable and would pass if they waited it out.

Spending enough money that even royalty and nobility considered it an expense to make a mere quarter of the year more comfortable was a rarity. Aside from anything else, while Zenjirou’s teleportation made it easy to forget, the country was over a month of travel away for a one-way trip. While it would

be different for healing stones—*that* magic tool could be the difference between life and death—very few people would travel so far for just a little comfort.

“Well, that sums it up. While it is rather uncouth between royals, I will prepare the coin for you to pay directly.”

As Aura said, it showed a lack of refinement for royals to take large sums of money directly to pay for things like magic tools. However, the distance between the two countries was enough that it was two months round-trip, which meant a bank draft would be impossible to exchange. With Zenjirou being able to teleport, there was no one who could be trusted more to carry the money. Therefore, he would be stuck acting as treasurer even though he was royalty.

“Got it. Should we be the ones paying, though? It sounds harsh, but the princess is the one who needs it.”

At least at present, Princess Freya was not part of Capua, but rather of Uppasala. If she needed a magic tool, logic dictated that she would buy it.

However, Aura had already taken that into account and shook her head. “No, we will buy the tool. We can install it in a section of the inner palace for her in the future.”

“Oh, right. That makes sense,” he said in understanding.

It was all but assured that she would become his concubine. If she was therefore going to be brought into the inner palace, ensuring the inner palace was pleasant for her was Capua’s job. The blessings of modern appliances were only available in the main area that Zenjirou and Aura called home. Using the magic tools to prepare the annex that Freya would call home for the heat of the blazing season was not a bad idea.

“It is piling more obligations on you, so I apologize.”

“No worries. I’ll get it done,” he answered with his usual smile.

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About two days had passed since Freya had been relocated to deep within the

palace. Zenjirou and Aura had received a request for an audience with her, but the location was in Freya's new room.

Requesting the queen and consort to come to *you* rather than vice versa was slightly impolite. Considering Freya's current constitution, though, it was minor enough to pass without much comment. Regardless of anything else, it seemed unlikely she would ask for them both just to offer her thanks. The two found a point in their busy schedules that worked and headed to meet with the foreign princess.

"Welcome, Your Majesties," Freya greeted them as they entered her room. "I offer my apologies for the presumption of requesting your presence rather than the alternative."

She was wearing a thin, sleeveless dress, and her voice was far more energetic than Zenjirou had expected.

"Think nothing of it. I am pleased to see you are doing better than I had thought, Princess Freya," Aura replied.

"Thank you, Your Majesty. I can only credit you with it. My appetite has returned and I can continue my life without issue—while I am within this room, at least," she said, her lips quirking into a chagrined smile with that last statement.

One of the maids being loaned to her was, even now, wafting a fan over a large metal bowl of ice, circulating the air. It made the room much cooler. Zenjirou's subjective impression would peg the temperature at around twenty-five to thirty degrees. Compared to the common forty-plus degrees that Capua's blazing season could see, it was a retreat that almost brought tears to the eyes.

Indeed, the princess now turned to him, thanking him deeply with a multitude of emotions in her voice.

"The magic tool used for producing ice even in this heat is yours, I believe, Your Majesty. Thank you for using such a precious item for my sake. I cannot thank you enough."

The sheer depth to which she bowed her head was proof that the gratitude

went beyond what would be expected out of societal obligation.

“Not at all. I am glad we were able to halt things before they grew more serious,” he replied, taking an offered seat.

Aura sat herself in a matching chair at his side. Both of them—and Freya’s own chair—were relatively plain wicker chairs. There was a similarly plain and small round wooden table between the three. However, the fancier plush sofas and massive table would never fit into this room.

Regardless, now that they were all seated, it fell to Aura to start the discussion as the highest-ranked individual present.

“So, Princess Freya. My apologies, but I am not possessed of much time. It may be somewhat rude, but I would know what you have asked us here for.”

The Northern princess straightened at the blunt request from the queen.

“Of course. His Majesty will be returning to the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle once more, will he not? Would it be possible for me to accompany him as well? I have requests I wish to make of their enchanters.”

Zenjirou exchanged the briefest of glances with his wife. Knowing that his words would be taken as a verbal confirmation that she would be his concubine—albeit only shared among those present—he stepped in as Aura handed the response over to him.

“Princess, you need not worry if that commission would be for cooling magic tools. I will be purchasing a set and gifting them to you.”

Freya’s eyes widened as she replied rather emotionally. “Oh my. I offer my thanks that you would be so considerate, Your Majesty. However, I would not only be requesting those. I also want magic tools for use on the *Glafir’s Leaf*—water purifiers, along with things like water and wind manipulators.”

There was a strong conviction in her words. Zenjirou and Aura could both understand the thrust of her request.

“I see,” Zenjirou replied.

“Indeed,” Aura added.

The trip between the continents was—even with the latest and greatest in

ship technology that the *Glasir's Leaf* represented—a risky affair that could easily end in death. The princess's presence in Capua to begin with was due to a storm knocking them off course. She would need to perform at least another round trip in order to get permission from her homeland to become Zenjirou's concubine. Wanting to make that trip safer in any possible way was understandable. Of course, Freya had also not said she would stop her seafaring after she became his concubine.

Husband and wife exchanged glances once again, nodded, and this time Aura spoke.

"I understand. I have no objections personally in that case. However, since this involves another nation, I hope you can understand it will require more than just my own permission." Once Freya showed her understanding with a nod, Aura turned her gaze to the prince consort. "Zenjirou."

"Yes, ma'am," he replied, switching to the slightly rarer behavior of a vassal rather than a husband.

"You are to convey Princess Freya's wishes to the Twin Kingdoms once you arrive. Have their reply made into a letter and send it back with an appropriate knight or maid there."

"I understand," he replied calmly to the command. It was more or less what he had expected. They could not send someone else to the country unannounced. Since he would be returning there anyway, both gaining permission and conveying it to Capua would be his role.

Aura nodded in satisfaction at the agreement before turning once again to Freya and offered her a warning with a slightly hard expression. "While it is not yet certain, I have little doubt they shall grant permission. The country constantly deals with purchases of both healing and magic tools, after all. With Zenjirou's introduction as a member of our royal family, I believe they will be willing to deal with you. However, I can offer no guarantee that they will be willing or able to sell to you. On that front, you will need to make your own arrangements."

Zenjirou would also be buying magic tools, but she had no concerns in that regard. The cooling tools were in constant use in the two palaces—the Purple

Egg Palace and the Ivory Cathedral—so there would certainly be a surplus of such items on hand.

Moreover, Zenjirou was part of a royal family known throughout the continent. If nothing else, there was always the ulterior motive of maintaining relationships with the wielders of teleportation magic. It enabled those who acquired such a relationship the potential of a much faster return if they ever traveled across the continent to Capua.

Aura was all but certain they would be willing to offer a decent price on surplus goods to maintain that favor.

In comparison, Freya was nothing more than a princess from the far *far* north. Regardless of how things were on the Northern Continent, even the country she hailed from was all but unknown on the Southern Continent.

With a royal of Zenjirou's stature vouching for her status, they would probably treat her as royalty. However, the vast majority of their potential clients were either royalty or domestically influential nobles regardless. There was no need to treat her with any special favor. She would therefore fall right at the end of the queue and need to wait her turn under normal instances.

Despite that explanation from Aura, Freya didn't falter. She simply nodded with a dispassionate look on her face.

"If that is unavoidable, then so be it. While it may not be possible to obtain them for this trip, I would still like to reserve them."

"Oh, even if not possible for *this* trip?" Aura repeated with meaningful emphasis.

She then directed a look to Zenjirou, asking if that was acceptable.

Understanding the implication, Zenjirou nodded.

"That sounds like a fine idea, Princess Freya. Magic tools would be a literal lifeline for long sea voyages. I support your wisdom here," he said, offering his "permission" with a smile.

"Thank you, Sir Zenjirou!"

Her joy seemed to have overwhelmed her as her voice shook slightly, a grin of

her own spreading across her face. Ordering tools for seafaring even if they might not be ready for this particular voyage had clear connotations. In other words, she did not intend to let this round trip to gain permission to become Zenjirou's concubine be her last. While the arrangements may end with her being in the position of the ship's owner rather than its captain, that was still a goal that was impossible for a normal woman to reach.

Therefore, Zenjirou's answer to his wife's question was also an answer to whether Freya would maintain her freedom even after marriage, which explained the joy in her voice.

While Aura was not entirely happy with a concubine candidate looking at her husband with teary eyes, she knew that was not something she could show here.

"In that case, I have nothing more to say. Princess, I would wager that if you should visit the country, you will be invited to banquets and the like with Zenjirou."

"Ah, true. Skaji and I are the only two who will be able to travel, so our luggage will be limited. I *would* still like to take a set of evening wear, though. Okay, Skaji?"

"Very well," Skaji nodded calmly, having remained silent up until then from her position behind Freya. She was well-built even for a male warrior, let alone a female one. One might even call her herculean. So a set of dresses and accessories were likely to be little more than a rounding error in the weight she was carrying.

"I cannot take *all* of my dresses, though. Which shall I choose?" the princess mused.

"There is no need to make a particular display, is there, Princess? Are your normal dresses insufficient?"

Aura consciously lifted the corners of her lips into a smile and cut into the conversation between the guard and her liege.

"I wish to make an offer of my own on that front. Would you be willing to accept it?"

The exaggerated tone and blatantly superficial smile led Freya to immediately make her own expression blank. “Oh my, you would be willing to do so, Your Majesty?” she asked.

“Indeed. I have actually commissioned a suitable dress from the tailors as a surprise for you. Naturally, it will need to be adjusted to fit you properly, but that should not take long.”

Zenjirou’s estimate of Freya’s height was around a hundred and sixty centimeters tall, give or take. It was short enough that she was considered below average height in her homeland, but tall enough she was right around average height in Capua. A skilled tailor would be able to fit a dress to her frame relatively well simply measuring by eye. While the topic had come up suddenly, Freya was used to that kind of thing with her position as royalty and was able to accept it without any real shock.

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

“Though I must admit some concern,” Aura added after a nod. “After all, a dress focusing on reds may clash somewhat with your hair and eye color. I imagine it may take some effort to do, but you should be able to ameliorate that with suitable accessories.”

Freya’s face showed surprise for an instant at Aura’s statement that the base color of the dress would be red. It was hardly a surprise. Red was the emblematic color of Capua. Such a dress being gifted directly to her by the queen and worn while escorting the prince consort would be taken as a clear statement she was to be considered part of the Capuan royal family both domestically and internationally.

“M-My thanks, Your Majesties! I will carry myself as a member of the Capua family in such a way that I will bring no shame upon the dress! I can scarcely even express myself! Truly, it is so moving. I would be unsurprised if my und—”

“Princess!” Skaji called desperately, managing to cut her liege off before the princess’s joy made her say something too crass for her position.



Once Zenjirou and Aura had left, Freya still hadn’t calmed down and was

almost squealing with delight.

“Yes! I managed it! I can take this as a visible acceptance from Queen Aura, right?!”



While her expression was somewhat exasperated as she watched Freya bounce around the room, the warrior agreed in a calm tone.

“I suppose so. This dress can certainly be considered favor from Her Majesty.”

Ordinarily, gifting a dress would fall to the husband, Zenjirou. It coming from Aura—who was his legitimate wife—could be taken as a declaration of war in the case of normal nobles. However, the circumstances were decidedly different than with normal royalty and nobility.

In normal cases, the husband was the head of the household, his wife was beneath him, and any concubines were equal to her. In name, the legal wife would be higher, but affection from the man of the house, relative status of the involved families, and a concubine birthing an heir could all—and often did—change that.

Things were distinctly different with Zenjirou and Aura, though. The head of the royal family, and the monarch, was Aura, the wife. Zenjirou was fundamentally her spouse, the prince consort, and nothing more. In other words, Zenjirou stood alongside the queen as her prince consort, and any concubines would be below them. It made it effectively impossible for a concubine to place themselves higher than the queen. Therefore, any woman wishing to become a concubine would need to win Aura’s favor.

When taking that into account, Freya’s overwhelming joy at *Aura* giving her a dress in red was practically inevitable.

“Say, Skaji? Should I offer some form of return gift for the dress, perhaps?” she asked.

The warrior pondered the question for a time before shaking her head. “No, I think it would be best not to,” she said. “The red dress given to you personally by Her Majesty is a sign of welcome into the Capuan royal family. Carelessly offering a gift in return could be taken as a sign that you were trying to place yourself as an equal to her.”

“I see. Then I shall simply accept the generosity this time. The question then becomes what to match the dress with. We have no accessories that use rubies brought from home, do we?” Freya knew the answer but asked the question

regardless.

“We do not. We decided that the risk of a clash with your complexion was too great.”

Freya did the same with her dresses and with any gems—those closer to her hair and eye colors were a safer bet. Her hair was a blue-tinged silver, while her eyes were ice-blue. It made reds—which clashed fairly easily with those colors—rather difficult for Freya to pull off with both dresses and accessories.

A specialist would be one thing, but Freya and Skaji were the only two women on the *Glasiir’s Leaf*. Skaji was more or less capable of most things required of a maid for Freya, but was not on the level of someone for whom it was an actual profession. Therefore, they had nothing so difficult to match as red-based dresses and accessories.

“Which makes the selection much more difficult. If we had more time, we could place an order with the Capuan merchants.”

“Ruby accessories would match the dress but may make your own complexion stand further out. They should instead act as a bridge between you and the dress. Perhaps something based on a sapphire but with smaller rubies around it? I seem to remember having several items like that.”

“I suppose there is no other option. Very well, let us go with that.”

Having at least temporarily finished with the problem of the red dress, Freya moved back to discussing her original plans.

“Considering Her Majesty’s behavior, we should be able to assume that there will be no issues with the journey itself. The problems will lie with actually purchasing the magic tools, wouldn’t you say?”

The warrior nodded in agreement. “Indeed. While the Twin Kingdoms produces magic tools, it is in very limited numbers. A single item can take at least a month and sometimes even years. It will depend upon the negotiations, but there is a distinct possibility that we may be refused.”

“I see. I would still like to get at least something for water purification before our return journey.” Freya then let out a gusty sigh, her desire for it clear.

Skaji looked up at the ceiling in thought for a while before answering. “From what we have heard, the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle is a desert country and therefore magic tools dealing with water play a big part in day-to-day life. Therefore, they must have a surplus of them. It should be eminently possible to buy one.”

It was Freya’s turn to pause in thought now. “True. However, I am slightly concerned that they would focus on creating water rather than purifying it in the desert.”

Water purification spells took water contaminated with sea salt or other impurities and made it potable. On the other hand, water creation was—as the term implied—magic that created water where there was none. In comparison, the latter took far more mana than simply changing the properties of water that already existed. This made purification much more efficient, as the ship was always alongside a water source. However, in the desert with no source of water at all, creation was the only option, however inefficient it was.

In truth, the country also had large salt lakes that served as water sources. They therefore produced many purifying tools, but neither Skaji nor Freya knew that.

“Regardless, I believe it is more likely than water or wind manipulation,” Skaji said calmly in response to the princess’s concerns.

Water manipulation was extremely useful when water managed to get into the ship’s hull, and wind manipulation was similarly valuable when sudden gusts blew the sail backward. However, they didn’t see much use on dry land. There was a much lower chance they would have a stock of relatively infrequently used spells.

“Indeed. Even if the commission is accepted immediately, it will take several months to complete. That will not be possible for the journey back. Those tools will be used more for future voyages.”

“Future voyages?” Skaji asked meaningfully as Freya’s voice lifted in joy.

Freya, for her part, almost leaped from the chair. “That’s right: future voyages. His Majesty called purchasing magic tools for such voyages a good idea. You’d best prepare yourself, Skaji; our adventures are just beginning!”

There was a bright smile on her face.

“Very well, Princess. I will follow wherever you lead,” Skaji replied with a deep bow of her head. Her own lips curved in a smile at the sight of her liege’s wide grin.



Several days later, Zenjirou and Aura were across from each other in the living room. He would be heading to the Twin Kingdoms through teleportation, so he was dressed sharply in the third uniform with a heavy-looking rucksack over his shoulders. It was the same rucksack he’d shouldered on his second summoning to this world. The straps dug into his shoulders due to it being mostly full of silver coins.

Teleportation was an extremely convenient spell, but each usage could only send a single person, which meant that taking a large amount of goods to one’s destination could lead to even a royal shouldering the burden themselves. It was hardly the best look, but there was no choice.

Aura addressed him as he adjusted the straps when they bit further into him. “These are the letters from me. This is to King Bruno of the Sharou family, and this is for Pope Benedict of the Gilbelles,” she explained as she handed each letter to him.

“Got it,” he acknowledged briefly.

The letters likely contained any personal negotiations Aura wanted to carry out and even he hadn’t been told what they contained. His work in the business sector had given him at least some proficiency with a poker face. However, it would not be enough to fool the sly royals he would interact with. If there was information he needed to pretend to not know, it was safer to *actually* not know it. Naturally, it was not exactly pleasant to have his wife going over his head like that, but he trusted her not to make plans that would harm him.

“This is the last thing,” she continued, taking a small box from a maid. Inside it was a set of four marbles. “They were just completed this morning. These are the best of the batch. Hand them over to Prince Francesco when you get there.”

“They managed it?!”

Zenjirou's shock was clear as he almost snatched the box from her to look. It was the first batch of marbles made by the craftsmen from the palace. They were slightly more transparent than a ramune bottle, he thought. One of them had a large, visible air bubble, while two were visibly aspheric even without taking them from the box.

The best mediums for enchantment were transparent spheres. The material was see-through, but laypeople like Aura or Zenjirou would be unable to know whether the slightly deformed marbles with the dark green bubbles were suitable. Their only choice, therefore, was to look to Prince Francesco's judgment as a specialist. Currently, he was in the Twin Kingdoms, so it was hard to know whether they would reach him.

"Are you sure? It might go further than him if we bring them up while I'm there."

It went without saying that the Sharous were in full force in the Twin Kingdoms. This meant that even with explicit instructions, it may be impossible to prevent people other than Francesco himself from seeing it. Either way, Zenjirou would be sending Francesco and Bona back to Capua before his own return. Was there a real need to run the risk of doing this while they were there?

Aura gave a firm shake of her head. "Whatever else, Prince Francesco and Princess Bona are full members of the Sharou family. Their very cooperation makes its exposure only a matter of time. Besides, the reason manufacturing those jewels is worth it is that they are valuable as reagents in enchanting. We will eventually need to draw up another contract between us and those very enchanters in the Sharou family."

Aura was hoping that a child of Zenjirou's might one day be born with access to that lineal magic. However, even if that bore fruit, they would run into the issues of the incantations. With the head court mage and his wife—Espiridion and Pasquella—Capua would likely be able to develop at least basic enchanting due to their skill in the magic language. However, that was a pointless waste of time. If they could instead gain the cooperation of a line of enchanters going back centuries, they would not need to fumble around for years to discover the proper incantations.

“So basically there’s no need for us to put on airs?”

“To be blunt, no. Also, with regard to that, I have indicated that I would like a conversation about it in my letter to King Bruno. If we do eventually manage to mass-produce these jewels, we will need their cooperation.”

Aura had the true countenance of a queen as she made the declaration. Capua’s metaphorical hand consisted of the future possibility of mass-producing marbles and Zenjirou’s latent link to enchantment magic. In addition, they also had the infant Carlos Zenkichi, who would have both space-time magic and enchantment.

On the other side, the Sharou family had many grown enchanters and hundreds of years of experience in the craft. Calmly and logically, anyone could see that both parties would be best served by pooling their resources.

Of course, the current relationship between royal families meant that things would never end so neatly. Each of them would be doing their best in both upfront negotiations and backroom dealings to further their own interests and stymie the other’s. In this instance, the Capuans needed to guard the secret of marble manufacturing beyond all else. If that leaked, the Sharou family would no longer need them and could simply mass-produce magic tools of their own.

The secret was currently held by the glassblowers in the courtyard, but the real risk was Zenjirou. After all, the method came from his own knowledge. Of course, that knowledge was just a vague smattering garnered from a TV show. The credit for the achievement of making these marbles—however imperfect they were—in around a single year would certainly go to the craftsmen.

However, those craftsmen were fundamentally the dregs of the blacksmithing industry, not anything special. The Twin Kingdoms would have people of equal knowledge and competence. In other words, if they could gain the key in the form of Zenjirou and put the same amount of time and effort in as Aura, they could probably get similar results on their own.

Thus, the queen belabored the point even more to her husband. “Zenjirou, no matter what, you must indicate no knowledge of the production method. It matters not if it means you correct yourself, nor how much doubt it casts upon you. There is the possibility they may consider you to be acting in ill faith, but

even that should be ignored. Avoiding even the slightest hint as to their make is to be your utmost priority.”

“Got it,” Zenjirou answered, his tone just as serious as hers.

Zenjirou was by nature someone unskilled with lies and subterfuge. However, his interactions with the king and the crown prince had been, for better or worse, the cause of a still smoldering rage. He was sure he would be able to deal with bad faith and aggression without an issue.

“I should get going.”

As he spoke, Zenjirou swung the bag from his shoulders to place the letters and box into its pockets. Then, once he had shouldered it again, he picked up the camera. Naturally, it had been charged the day before, its battery filled. He manipulated it with the casual ease of familiarity, putting the image he wanted on its display.

The image was, of course, of his destination: The Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle.

With everything ready, the couple spent some time exchanging their farewells.

“Take care,” said Aura. “I know I have told you this countless times, but you are the most important thing. The agreement for a healer, your agreements with the Sharou family, and everyone else present there are all but worthless in comparison. You should return alone if you feel in danger, even if it means losing everything else. Understood?”

It was much the same as she’d told him when he’d left the last time. He meekly accepted her words.

“Yeah, I know.”

He had an emotional reaction against abandoning everyone else and fleeing alone, but he knew intellectually that his position required nothing less. The queen’s expression softened slightly in relief at that.

“Then be careful. I do not mind sending you myself. Are you sure you wish to travel under your own power?”

“Yup, it’s fine. After all, I’m sure there are going to be an explosion of occasions for me to use it, so I should get used to it while I can.”

Even disregarding her current pregnancy, it went without saying which royal could be more light-footed between the reigning monarch and Zenjirou. Having any level of mastery of the spell meant that he would inevitably be sent on more business trips, both domestic and international. His resolution was all that she could hope for, both as his wife and as monarch.

“Then I shall leave it in your hands. It is rather rare to succeed immediately at first. Fortunately, you and I are the only people present, so you can simply repeat the attempt until you do.”

“Yeah, thanks. See you, then.”

He poured all of his focus onto the image on the camera’s screen. Once he felt like he could rebuild a vivid replica of it from memory, he shut his eyes and pushed his mana to rise up from him as he chanted.

“Send all things in the space that I envision to the place that I desire. As compensation, I offer—”

It took four repetitions of the enchantment before he vanished soundlessly from in front of Aura. Having seen him leave, the queen let out a sigh of mixed relief and loss.

“He left safely. I understand it but seeing someone vanish in front of you is hardly pleasant.”

As she murmured, her hand found its way to her left breast. Strictly speaking, its unconscious pressure was not on the breast itself, but further in, on her heart. She tried to calm its needless racing, directing her face towards the ceiling with still-closed eyes as she took several deep breaths. She had far too many family members who had left from in front of her via teleportation and never returned. Her father, brothers—both older and younger—her half sister, uncle, and various cousins. She had watched them all leave and never seen them again.

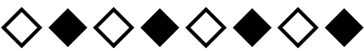
They were not currently at war, and while Zenjirou was heading abroad, it was to an allied nation. She knew the comparisons she was drawing between

him and her late family were meaningless, but it was impossible to fully control such emotions.

Still, the queen’s mantle was not so light she could drown in those feelings forever.

“Right, time to go. I need to arrange the inaugurations for the marshal and prime minister while my condition is still stable.”

Having fired herself up again, the queen walked with a purpose as she left the inner palace.



For Zenjirou’s part—once the momentary vertigo and disorientation of teleportation had passed—he opened his eyes to a room in the Purple Egg Palace of the Twin Kingdoms, far away in the center of the continent.

Despite the fact that they had not specified an exact time when he would arrive, there were several familiar figures waiting in the dimly lit room.

“I am glad to see you arrive safely, Sir Zenjirou,” a tall man, the most eye-catching of the group, greeted him.

“You have my thanks for waiting here, Eladio,” Zenjirou replied as he recalled the young commander’s name.

“It is an honor, sir!” the knight responded, coming to attention.

Eladio was the commander of the third battalion of the Drake Marksmen Knights, and he had a confident smile on his face.

“Sir Zenjirou, allow me to take your bag,” a somewhat familiar soldier offered.

“Ah, please do,” Zenjirou said, handing the bag over to him before slowly leaving the room.

The knight Natalio was at his side for protection while Ines followed behind them once he left the room. Now outside with the two familiar faces around him, his expression relaxed somewhat as he continued down the corridor.

While the exact time had been up in the air, his return to the country was in accordance with the agreements they had made beforehand. Due to that,

things went extremely smoothly. The same annex in the Purple Egg Palace had been kept as it was in Zenjirou's absence.

Once he was sitting in the familiar chair of the drawing room, Zenjirou loosened his uniform slightly and rolled his shoulders.

"Has anything happened here?" he asked. The question was directed to Ines. She had well and truly become both secretary and head maid when Zenjirou traveled.

"Indeed," she answered plainly. "There is one thing I wish for you to hear about. Lady Talajeh of the Elementacatto family and Lady Fiqriya of the Animeeum family have submitted a joint request for a meeting."

"Talajeh of the Elementacatto and Fiqriya of the Animeeum? Those are the families that have settled. What did they want?"

Zenjirou searched his memories for anything related. Fortunately, Talajeh's blonde waves of hair and full body, and Fiqriya's glossy black hair—considering its short length—were fairly atypical on the Southern Continent. Both of them were fairly easy to remember, so it didn't take long to call the two of them to mind.

"They have something they wish to request of you. The details will come out in the meeting, apparently."

"Something to request," Zenjirou parroted, musing.

His expression became a suspicious scowl. Despite being relatively young women, both had the position of representing two of the most important families in the Twin Kingdoms. A "request" from the pair was unlikely to be a trifling matter. He could already see the hassle it would cause, but that didn't mean he could avoid it.

"Got it. Organize an appropriate time and place," he said. Then, he had a sudden thought. "Oh. Make sure it's after the meeting with Pope Benedict if you can. I don't know what kind of request they're hoping to make, but I may not be able to respond until I have those plans in place."

"Understood."

As the two of them moved to converse further, a familiar voice sounded at the door.

“My apologies, Sir Zenjirou. Lady Lucretia has arrived; may I show her through?”

“Ah. Have her wait for a moment. Once the preparations are in place, I will inform you.”

“Yes, sir. I shall inform her.”

Zenjirou listened to the man’s footsteps grow distant as he stood.

“Ines, if you would?”

“At once, sir,” she replied, moving to fix the uniform he was wearing so that he could entertain guests.

“It has been a while, Your Majesty. It is an honor to once again be able to meet you like this,” Lucretia said crisply once she was shown in. Her characteristic side-tail bobbed as she bowed her head.

Her words and comport were that of a full-fledged woman, but her stature and features made her look younger than her age. Coupled with the too-long dress, the perfect word to describe Lucretia Broglie was “adorable.” She was an adopted daughter of the Sharou family and had been assigned as Zenjirou’s contact.

With a simultaneously innocent and false smile on her face, she followed Zenjirou’s gesture to sit on the sofa opposite him.

“Indeed. It seems you have not changed either. I will be in your care for a while once again.”

“Tell me anything you need,” she said, her wide, blue eyes blinking once as her words turned almost hungry.

Zenjirou stifled a pained smile at the sight of the girl failing to hide her intentions from him. “I am glad to hear it,” he said instead. “Allow me to get right to it, then. I have two requests. The first is the delivery of this letter to His Majesty. Ines.”

“Sir,” Ines responded to her cue, passing the letter to Lucretia. Though it was

not directly to the younger girl, but via the maid behind her, Flora.

Once Lucretia had taken the letter, she looked down at the seal and signature beneath it. As she did, her eyes widened slightly.

Zenjirou saw where her gaze went and spoke. “As you can see, this is a letter from Her Majesty Queen Aura I of Capua to His Majesty King Bruno III of The Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle. I would appreciate you ensuring it is delivered.”

“Of course, Your Majesty,” she replied.

At her answer, Zenjirou kept his tone as nonchalant as possible while continuing with his preprepared statements. “There are actually two such letters, though the second is addressed to His Grace Pope Benedict I. As I will be meeting with him, I shall deliver it directly, I believe.”

Zenjirou made a point of flourishing the other letter, and the girl couldn’t keep her expression under control. She gulped. Still, she managed to remember her position and pasted a smile on her face—not quite managing to cover her shaking voice, but making the attempt.

“Ah, Your Majesty? Perhaps you would also wish to directly deliver this to King Bruno as well? I am sure that he would not refuse an audience if you were to request one.”

Zenjirou felt slightly guilty about her anxiousness, but he put on a smile of his own before shaking his head. “There is no need. Fortunately, Her Majesty left the matter of their delivery to my discretion. I would not dream of taking more of His Majesty’s precious time than necessary during this period of transition. It will be delivered through you. Is that acceptable?”

The plainness with which he spoke meant that Lucretia really had no way to refuse him.

“I understand...” she replied, ashen-faced.

King Bruno and Pope Benedict were of equal rank. Hand-delivering a letter to the pope while also sending a letter through Lucretia to the king was a blatant sign of reticence towards the latter.

Zenjirou shuddered mentally at the clear surprise and tension on Lucretia's face—her retinue's expressions were much the same as well—but maintained his placid smile.

This is what Aura suggested, but is it really the best plan?

He was usually not so aggressive and would hesitate to blatantly show displeasure like this. Still, his route was now set. In truth, he didn't feel particularly strongly about Lucretia, but just thinking about the king prompted a resentful heat to curl in his gut.

The king and his son's actions in trying to turn Zenjirou's son into a political instrument had so definitively placed them in the category of "enemy" that it was all but impossible for him to change how he thought of them.

His thoughts were currently occupied with what Aura had told him beforehand. "This set of events have shown you as the sentimental sort," she had said. "It implies that you will compromise easily if they use Carlos, putting you on the defensive. Your next step is therefore to be on the offensive. That will give the impression that such appeals to emotion are likely to be more difficult."

A simple summary was that Zenjirou had to—for better or worse—show himself to be someone who made emotional judgments. There was no way of taking back the realization that using Carlos forced concessions. Therefore, the response he had to make was to ignore what would be to his own benefit and show clear displeasure with the king for doing exactly that. It planted the seed that if they were to do so again, they would be unable to predict the reaction.

If someone could be forced to concede by using someone close to them, those negotiating would happily resort to such actions. If, however, it could cause unforeseen retribution despite hurting the target, it became much harder to pull off.

I don't even need to act, he told himself. Just following royal etiquette shows my displeasure clearly enough.

He then spoke again. "I have also been told that Lady Talajeh and Lady Fiqriya of the Elementacatto and Animeeum houses, respectively, have requested an audience with me. I would like you to organize a suitable place and time."

While the requester and requestee would have been different on both fronts, Zenjirou had just indicated a willingness to meet those two immediately after an unwillingness to meet the king. Finally understanding that this wasn't a joke or misunderstanding, Lucretia actually seemed to steel herself and calm down.

"Understood, I shall make the arrangements at once. Is there anything else?"

"There is, in fact. A guest of Capua wishes to visit this country. The visit would be to purchase magic tools. If permission is granted, I would like accommodation for that purchase."

The request was somewhat abrupt. However, it gave Lucretia an opportunity to show her worth as a mediator for him. She thought it over before answering.

"I believe that entry to the country should be granted if you were to stand on their behalf. The purchasing of magic tools is more difficult, though. Your introduction would make things much easier, but I have very little sway with the Sharou family. I am honestly unable to promise much."

The capital was a bustling hub of international travel and constant requests for both magic tools and healing. That meant that the country was always willing to allow people entry. It also meant, however, that anyone visiting for such purposes would inevitably have to wait their turn.

Having already been warned of that, Zenjirou was not particularly surprised as he continued the conversation.

"Entry into the country and the start of negotiations would be more than enough. Thank you for your consideration. On a related note, I also wish to make some purchases and would appreciate you facilitating that."

"Do you mean to say that you would also be present for your guest's negotiations to purchase magic tools?"

Zenjirou shook his head.

"No, they are different matters. I would like to carry out my own negotiations. I do not mind if they take place at the same time, but they are to be separate. Is that possible?"

Caught up in the contradiction of Zenjirou's words, it took a moment before

Lucretia realized she hadn't asked the central question yet.

"Very well. I believe negotiations with you will be eminently possible. Incidentally, could I ask the name of your guest?"

"Ah, indeed. Her name is Freya Uppasala. She is a princess from the Kingdom of Uppasala on the Northern Continent."

Lucretia gasped slightly. Zenjirou was inviting another country's princess. Her instincts as a woman let her guess that Freya would be an enemy.

"I see. I shall ensure a suitable room is prepared."

"Please do. She will be traveling via teleportation, so it will only be her and her guard. Take that into account."

"Understood. Leave it with me."

While she still followed the manners expected of her, Lucretia's blue eyes burned with competitiveness towards the as-yet-unseen Northern princess.

Once Lucretia had left, Zenjirou stretched and rolled his shoulders again. He had traveled via teleportation, so the journey hadn't exhausted him. However, it had been a while since he had worn the third uniform and had an official meeting, so he was somewhat mentally worn.

Zenjirou's return to the Purple Egg Palace would already be public knowledge within the palace. The only one who would be visiting him would be Lucretia in her role as mediator. Anyone else making demands of his time on that first day would be quite the absurdity.

"Sir Zenjirou, Prince Francesco has arrived and wishes to see you. Are you willing?" Ines asked.

In other words, Francesco was quite an absurd person. That needed no further mention, though. As a matter of fact, while Zenjirou hadn't exactly expected the request, he had been waiting for it.

"Show him through. Make sure to remember the souvenir box."

"Understood, sir."

Zenjirou was already ready for a tiring meeting in a completely different sense

than dealing with normal nobility.

“It’s been a while, Your Majesty,” Francesco greeted immediately upon his entrance. “I don’t suppose I can call it a safe return home for you, though. Still, thank you for visiting again.”

“I am unsure whether it would count as a while. Still, I am happy to be in the Twin Kingdoms again, Prince Francesco.”

The prince had his usual easy smile as he reclined on the sofa, relaxed. He wet his throat with the provided tea before speaking again.

“I would love to say you should enjoy a quiet period here, but I personally would like you to send me back to Capua.”

“Is there something you wish to accomplish there?” Zenjiro asked.

“Well, rather than wanting to go to Capua, I should probably say I want to get away from here,” he said with an artless smile. “There are too many people to scold me here. Spending my day running around avoiding them leaves no time to actually sit and research.”

The deep sigh he heaved seemed rather over the top, but in his case, it was probably more honest than most. Regardless, Zenjiro’s answer didn’t change.

“We have no doors closed to you. However, that is the case for *Capua*. I cannot open the doors of the Twin Kingdoms for you, so please obtain permission from them first.”

“I thought as much...” his guest replied with a sigh. “I really want to avoid that. Father and grandfather won’t let me hear the end of it.”

His emotions were clear on his face. However, not letting any one feeling persist for long was another characteristic of the blond prince. His normal bright smile burst from his gloomy expression mere moments later as he changed the topic.

“Incidentally, Your Majesty, what is that box? It’s been on my mind the whole time.”

The box in question was—naturally—the box Aura had given him. Zenjiro decided the timing was right and gave Ines a meaningful look where she stood

behind him. The maid followed his signal to move the box in front of Francesco. Then, Zenjirou gave the prince a smile of his own.

“It is something given to me by Her Majesty. She wanted you to see it,” he explained.

“Oh? She did? A souvenir, perhaps?”

Zenjirou noticed the prince’s attendant twitch as he picked it up. Most royals would not personally open such a thing. They never knew when something could be a danger to them and would therefore learn such habits at a young age. Apparently, Francesco was an exception.

“Not quite,” Zenjirou answered as the prince happily opened it. “The items are indeed yours, but we would like your impressions—no, your evaluation—of them.”

“My evaluation?” Francesco repeated, tilting his head as he examined the contents. As he did, his expression changed immediately. Nestled within the box were four pseudo-marbles. The sight of them prompted a mixed look of shock and joy on his face. “These are *Her* Majesty’s, no? Not *Your* Majesty’s?” he confirmed.

Zenjirou gave a slow, intentional nod in response.

“Indeed. They are not mine; they are Her Majesty’s.”

“I see.”

The prince had received several marbles and used them for enchanting. However, they had all been Zenjirou’s. Being from his original world, they were limited in number despite their quality. These were Aura’s, though. They were proof positive that Capua was succeeding in making marbles of its own.

The shock seemed to fade as Francesco picked each of them up in turn and examined them, nothing but joy on his face.

“What are your thoughts, Prince Francesco?” Zenjirou asked.

That prompted the prince to tear his eyes from the box and give a small sigh. Then he shook his head. “Unfortunately, none of them are usable. When considering mediums for a magic tool, the more transparent something is, the

better. Conversely, a certain amount of imperfection can be ignored on that front, but the shape is not good enough. There are two possibilities: a sphere that can withstand use, or something unusable. These four are all insufficiently spherical. This one is very close, though.”

As he finished up his explanation, Francesco rolled the best-formed marble across his palm.

The best options for magic tools were transparent spheres. In terms of clarity, transparent objects would receive an A+. A slight clouding could drop that score down to ninety. Further clouding might make it fall to eighty. However, spheres that would stand up to use were one hundred percent suitable. Anything that was more than slightly deformed would be a simple zero. Warped or damaged spheres would be worse than a cut polyhedron.

“I see; the shape is more important. I will inform Her Majesty of that,” Zenjirou replied.

“Indeed. Naturally, the closer to transparent it is, the more efficient it will be as well. The most important factor is the shape, though. Would you mind if I were to use this, Your Majesty?” He pulled out the now-familiar magic tool that made noise from his pocket.

Zenjirou picked up on his intention and nodded. “Not at all. Ines, Natalio, fall back a ways as His Highness wishes.”

“Understood.”

“Yes, sir.”

Once both of their attendants had backed far enough away, Francesco set the noisemaker going. With the additional noise, only they could hear each other.

Francesco—having asked for this—was the first to speak. “I want to confirm this first, Your Majesty. Can I assume that these will be available for purchase once they are completed?” he asked, leaning forward as he held one of the pseudo-marbles between his index and middle fingers.

While he was somewhat taken aback by the prince’s intensity, Zenjirou replied with a slight warning. “That is all dependent on Her Majesty’s wishes, so I cannot say for certain. However, I imagine she will be willing to negotiate with

the Sharou family. Yet, as I am sure you can imagine, they have a certain gravity to them, so I believe any agreements may involve more than coin.”

However, Zenjirou’s reminder missed the mark this time. Francesco simply shook his head calmly. “I am not referring to deals between our two respective families. I wish to purchase them as an individual.” The selfish request left his lips without any sign of awareness of his royal station.

“I wager that such an act would end with a lecture from His Majesty,” Zenjirou remarked.

“It’s okay, I’m already prepared for that,” the young man said with a clenched fist.

“I am not entirely sure you can call that ‘okay.’”

“In which case, I’ll just make sure it stays a secret. After all, I’m heading back to Capua, so I can buy it there with him being none the wiser.”

Zenjirou was certain that it would come out sooner or later, but he decided there was no point in saying anything more. The prince’s firm speech made him certain of that.

“I can certainly see that if you were in Capua, it would cause lost time to go via His Majesty here. Perhaps as long as the documents were in order, a portion could be dedicated personally to you?”

Zenjirou thought it was a rather clever way of dealing with it, but the prince shook out his long blond hair in disagreement.

“That won’t work. I wish to create a magic tool my father and grandfather have forbidden while I am there.”

“Please. Avoid international incidents,” Zenjirou retorted instantly. It could certainly be taken as a great deal of insight. If the prince was telling the truth, then he could hardly hand over one of the marbles to him. It could—should the worst come to pass—cause a real rift between the two nations.

Despite the refusal, though, the prince kept going. “I’m nearly there, though. I have the theory in place, but it would take more than a decade to produce. That’s why I need those gems. Please understand, Your Majesty.”

“I understand, but my answer remains unchanged. I do not know the kind of tool you intend to create but would rather Her Majesty and I are not painted as accomplices in something your king and crown prince have forbidden.”

He had intended it to be a strong refusal, but the prince’s reaction was completely different than he had expected.

“Wait...you don’t know? Truly? You honestly have not heard of the tool I wish to create?”

Zenjirou had no idea why Francesco seemed so perplexed. “I know nothing of it,” he swore. “Why would I?”

Francesco shrugged as he answered. “Well, I revealed it to Her Majesty quite some time ago. Ah, though I did also say it was to be kept secret from everyone.”

“Then how would I know?”

“I’m just surprised that she kept it private even from you,” he said, a cheery smile on his face despite the rude statement.

Zenjirou’s cheek twitched slightly. However, the man was merely speaking a generally accepted fact. An official contract was one thing, but a verbal agreement of secrecy was very rarely adhered to. Telling all and sundry would be out of the question, but trusted family like Aura and Zenjirou would usually share such things.

Naturally, admitting to such a breach in front of those concerned would be absurd. The prince lowered his voice, face still completely innocent.

“Then I shall explain once again. I wish to make a magic tool of enchantment. Her Majesty showed considerable interest, so I believed she may be willing to cooperate.”

Zenjirou mostly stifled a gasp, unable to fully hide his shock at the unexpected answer. Enchanting a magic tool with the ability to create magic tools was something he could easily understand the king and the crown prince forbidding. His expression sharpened into a rebuking look as he answered with a warning.

“Prince Francesco, are you trying to hand the world to the Sharou family?”

The prince's reaction, however, was far from what he had expected.

"Huh?"

"What?"

Both of them fell silent. The prince seemed unable to understand what Zenjirou meant, and Zenjirou couldn't understand how the prince could fail to do so. Zenjirou was the one to break the silence.

"Perhaps I am misunderstanding something. The tool you wish to create would be one that creates other tools, no?"

Francesco nodded in agreement. "Correct. That was why my father and grandfather demanded to know whether I was trying to ruin the family."

"Ruin" was an exaggeration, but Francesco could understand why they would ask. Lineal magic was part of the vested rights of royalty. While it would be limited in scope, allowing those outside of royalty the ability to use that lineal magic would devalue the royal family itself. Thus, he couldn't understand why Zenjirou had the opposite impression.

The answer showed the disconnect, so Zenjirou spoke up to clarify things. "Ah, would the tool you are proposing allow anyone to use anything that fell under 'enchantment'?"

That would completely crumble the foundations of his hypothesis. However, Francesco shook his head. "No, that would be impossible. My plan is for individual tools, each of which creates a single other magic tool. The first would be for water creation. Our country has a severe lack of that, after all."

Zenjirou knew his thoughts weren't incorrect then. "If those limited magic tools made their way through the world, the popularity of magic tools themselves will increase explosively. That's just how convenient they are."

"Indeed. Even now there is a long line of people at the Purple Egg Palace looking to buy them. That's why I can understand their concern. The spread of those tools will shorten that line, worsening our finances. That's why I would forbid the international sale of those magic tools, or perhaps establish other exceptional measures to deal with it."

He was stressing that the Twin Kingdoms couldn't actually supply all the magic tools that even the country itself required.

"Ah, I see..." Zenjirou finally understood where their views differed. His impression that the royals of this world hoarded their lineal magics to bring in profit was too strong. Of course, that was at least partially true, but Zenjirou was considering this proposal's potential to completely overturn the current value system.

Was this another slip? he asked himself.

Whether it was or not, Francesco hadn't yet understood what his desired project would mean.

"I would like to ask why you have the exact opposite impression, Your Majesty." Considering Francesco's nature, the prince may well have been asking out of genuine curiosity. Still, there was no need to purposefully spread such risky thoughts.

"It was just a slight misunderstanding. I was simply thinking of the increase in potential production rather than anything more in-depth. Truly, King Bruno and Prince Josep's insight is impressive," Zenjirou deflected, simultaneously vowing to discuss it with Aura as soon as he returned to Capua.

Chapter 2 — Contract of the Ivory Cathedral

Three days had passed since Zenjirou's arrival in the Twin Kingdoms.

This was the first time he'd set foot in the other royal palace the royal families possessed: the Ivory Cathedral.

As the name implied, it was very different from the Purple Egg Palace, being a building that was mostly white. Additionally, while the former was built with the Southern Continent's tendency towards round roofs, the Ivory Palace followed the architectural style of the Northern Continent.

The coloring was part of it, but the whole building felt somewhat calmer than the Purple Egg Palace to Zenjirou as he walked down its long corridors to the audience room. His name was loudly proclaimed, and he walked down the aisle formed by rows of various generals to the throne before stopping and waiting for the monarch to speak.

So far, things were the same as they had been in the Purple Egg Palace. He surveyed the old man enthroned on the dais.

So this is Pope Benedict Gilbelle... he thought to himself. I seem to remember him being just about in his sixties but he actually looks more like his age than King Bruno. He looks older, at least.

Indeed, the pope was an old man with a long white beard.

His complexion was still good, but his small, withered frame made him look every inch the old man. However, his voice had lost none of its strength, sounding like that of a man much younger.

"I am Pope Benedict of the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle. I am sure old Bruno has extended our greetings for the country as a whole, so I greet you on behalf of the Gilbelle family. Welcome to the Ivory Cathedral, Your Majesty."

"I am Zenjirou, husband to Queen Aura I of the Kingdom of Capua. It is an honor to meet you, Your Grace."

The pope's kindly voice had done much to relax him as he repeated the well-practiced greeting. As the words passed his lips, he couldn't help but remember the previous occasion—the memories of King Bruno ambushing him with his abdication as soon as the formalities were observed were still fresh in his mind.

The man seemed to intuit Zenjirou's tenseness. "I am glad to hear it. You can relax. Unlike Bruno, I am not one to discomfit my guests with wild announcements in a place like this," he said. His grin made it obvious it was a joke. Then again, the joke was at the expense of another monarch, so Zenjirou wasn't entirely sure whether he could laugh at it or not. Instead, he made a vague noise of acknowledgment and decided to avoid questioning what he did not know on that front.

"I have here a missive from my queen to Your Grace," he said instead, pulling out the letter and handing it to one of the pope's subordinates to pass to him.

Once the letter reached him, Benedict broke the seal and glanced through it. One of his long brows rose for a moment, but his expression soon returned to its usual placid smile as he responded to Zenjirou.

"Ah, very well. Please inform Her Majesty that she is completely understood. I will provide an official response via letter in the future. Would that be acceptable?"

"It would. Thank you."

Since Zenjirou hadn't read the letter personally, that was all he could say.

"Well, while we are no strangers, our positions on our thrones mean that I can neither go to visit her nor can she do the same. Convey my well-wishes for her health, would you?"

"I certainly will," he answered.

It was a slight surprise to hear that they knew each other, but Aura's ability to teleport to the Twin Kingdoms meant that it shouldn't have been. Teleportation required a detailed mental image of the destination. Unless you had the unfair advantage of a camera like Zenjirou did, that meant that you needed to have spent a fair amount of time in any destination. He seemed to remember Aura saying almost exactly that. Therefore it was entirely unsurprising that she and

Pope Benedict would know each other.

Once the relatively meaningless chitchat was done, the pope moved to the main topic.

“I have heard what you have come to our land for, Your Majesty. You wish for the Gilbelle Papacy to dispatch one of its healers to ensure Her Majesty’s health during her pregnancy, correct?”

Zenjirou nodded at the statement from the pope. “Indeed. I hope we can come to some arrangement.”

This was the tensest time for Zenjirou. This was the only reason he had dared to set foot in the country despite knowing the Sharou family would be ready and waiting. Bruno’s initial negotiations provided a healer for at least a month, but he couldn’t let his guard down until everything was settled. There was a fair possibility of more unreasonable demands.

Unaware of Zenjirou’s tension, though, the pope gave an easy agreement. “Indeed. I have heard from Bruno. He caused you quite the issue, I understand. Very well, I shall dispatch a healer as you wish.”

Zenjirou didn’t manage to hide his shock at the easy assent. “Thank you,” he said as the pope gave him a grandfatherly smile.

“You may decide the time period as you wish. However, the payment will, of course, be stipulated to correspond to its length. Also, the burden of transport for the healer, guards, and attendants will fall upon you.”

“Understood,” Zenjirou answered immediately.

The conditions the pope was imposing were standard, so there was no need to negotiate them. The details for payment would need to be decided at a later date, but the fact that it would be “stipulated” meant that it would be money, so it was just a matter of the sum that would be asked. It seemed like he would avoid any ridiculous demands from nowhere this time.

“The choice of the healer will, of course, rest with us,” the pope said before quickly adding, “It will be a woman, though, naturally. You can rest assured of that.”

“I thank you for the consideration,” Zenjirou replied.

A male healer for a pregnant woman like Aura would cause multiple issues. As they were considered physicians, they would be allowed within the inner palace in the course of their duties regardless of gender. There was no real taboo against the men seeing female patients either, but a female healer would still be for the best.

“It is only natural for the Queen of Capua, after all. Isabella, step forward.”

“Of course, Your Grace.”

A woman approached from the walls of people surrounding them. She looked to be in her late forties or so, with the extra padding that came with such an age. She was neither tall nor short and wore a white dress—the emblematic color of the Gilbelle family. Put simply, she was like a plump—but refined—grandmother.



“I presume you have been listening?” the pope asked. “You are to head to Capua and see to Her Majesty Queen Aura’s health. Your other actions should follow the stipulations set forth.”

“Understood, Your Grace,” the woman—Isabella—said with a polite bow. Then she turned to Zenjirou. “It has been a while, Your Majesty. As you have heard, I am to be dispatched to Capua. This stay may be much longer than the last, but I hope it goes well.”

Isabella Gilbelle was the person who had helped Zenjirou when he was sick with The Blessing of the Forest. He was rather ill when they’d met, so his memories were somewhat vague, but she was familiar enough that the greeting felt natural.

“Likewise. A visit from a healer of your stature is a fine honor.”

His response was genuine. Isabella was said to be one of the top five healers in the papacy. He couldn’t think of anyone more reassuring. It would likely end up rather hard on the treasury but considering the value of her aid, it was nothing to complain about.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” he continued with a bow of his head, gratitude in his tone. “I look forward to working with you, Lady Isabella.”



It was the evening of Zenjirou’s audience with the pope. Bruno and Josep were meeting in the neighboring Purple Egg Palace with somewhat grave faces.

It was a private room, so the illumination was not accomplished via fire—even static fire—but with light balls. They were a far brighter, whiter light that gave off no heat, much like LEDs or fluorescent bulbs.

The topic of their meeting was the letter they had received from Aura. Bruno was the addressee, but with Josep’s position as next in line officially decided, he was able to read it as well. In fact, *not* ensuring that he had such information would cause greater problems in the future.

The letter they were pondering was distilled down to the following three points:

Aura would not be visiting foreign countries due to the need to protect the throne, along with the possibility of further children. Therefore, Zenjirou would be tasked with international visits while she remained in Capua.

She would, as a rule, approve and agree with his conduct on those visits.

If people wanted to negotiate directly with her, they would need to give diplomats in the kingdom more authority or else replace them with someone who already has that authority.

Once the two had finished reading, they let out a sigh in unison.

“This has become an issue,” the younger man commented.

“Indeed it has. Queen Aura may be young, but she had the skill to survive the war.”

He’d heard the full details of the letter’s delivery from Lucretia. Despite having two letters for people of ostensibly equal rank, only the letter to Benedict had been delivered personally by Zenjirou, while the other had been passed off to Lucretia, his mediator. It was a clear message that he was unhappy with the king. Additionally, judging by the letter, the queen was permitting it.

“It would appear that His Majesty does not just dote upon his children, but will overreact when they are brought up,” Bruno commented.

“Truly. It is certainly a weakness, but one to be wary of exploiting lest we get burned as well.”

“Like this time.”

Josep fell silent at his father’s words. Still, they were the king and king-to-be. They wouldn’t just let this pass. They would organize things and feel out their choices.

“If our two countries are to associate into the future, then the only person who will be visiting will be His Majesty. After all, only he and Her Majesty can use teleportation. Said point of contact is currently showing reticence towards you and me,” Bruno summarized.

“Meanwhile, he seems to be well-disposed towards Largo. At least more so.”

“Indeed. That would make Largo a likely point of contact. It would be best to avoid that,” the king said with a sour look.

As far as the public was concerned, Josep and Largo were political rivals, despite their siblinghood. In truth, they were well enough disposed to each other that they had private meetings to ensure that neither caused permanent harm to the country. Still, they *did* have political disagreements. Both men present would rather deal with Capua personally than go through Largo.

“Negotiating through His Majesty will be rather difficult. I would therefore prefer to carry out the negotiations within Capua with Her Majesty directly, but...” the prince trailed off with a slight shrug.

His father picked up the thread. “The letter then becomes an issue. Her Majesty wants the diplomats there to either have more authority or be replaced by those who do.”

The Sharou family could not simply agree to that. As the country’s name implied, the *Twin* Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle was a nation that consisted of two royal families ruling side by side. The general understanding was the Sharou family dealt domestically, while the Gilbelles were international. It therefore followed that the diplomats’ authority was determined by the Gilbelle Papacy.

Naturally, most of the diplomats were nobility close to the Gilbelle family, while the Sharou family had very few diplomats beholden directly to them. The knight Mareno Militello was a strong piece they had to play. Unfortunately, there were no other diplomats under the Sharou family’s auspices that had a higher position.

Additionally, they could not simply elevate Mareno without consulting the Gilbelle family as well. In other words, the letter meant that to negotiate directly, they would *need* to involve the Gilbelle family. It went without saying that although the two families had formed an alliance to rule the country, there was a never-ending tug-of-war for power between them.

“His Majesty’s rudeness and Her Majesty’s disadvantageous conditions would normally be a simple official protest that could be waited out...”

“But with this sent alongside it, we cannot do so,” Josep sighed, picking up a

pseudo-marble from the box on the desk. He rolled it across his palm.

If they had wanted to hide it, they could have waited until Francesco was back in Capua before showing him. Purposefully bringing it into the country was unquestionably an unofficial method of ensuring the king knew about it.

“These are still useless as they are, though they are very close in some ways. I would be unsurprised if they managed something usable before long,” the king said, eyes sharp.

The best medium for enchantments was a transparent sphere. That Zenjirou had brought such things from his world was a surprise, but nothing in comparison to the shock from this creation. Regardless of how many he had brought, the items from his world were limited in number. If they were possible to recreate in this world, however, that drastically changed the situation.

“I would like to get the method of construction. Still, that is not something we can rush. If we do, the rift between us will be a certainty. For the time being, we will have to get ourselves in a position where we can trade periodically for these gems once Capua starts producing them in earnest,” Josep said.

“Indeed. However, our co-negotiator is rather ill-disposed to the both of us, to be blunt. Negotiating directly with Her Majesty will mean making a demand of the Gilbelle family’s diplomats,” Bruno sighed.

“Which means she is suggesting two possible routes to obtain them once they become a commodity. The first is to work through His Majesty, while the second is to negotiate with her. In the former case, Largo will be our negotiator while in the latter, that will fall to a diplomat from the Gilbelles.”

From their perspective, the former meant their negotiator would be a political rival within the family. For the latter, it would be a political enemy within the country as a whole. Either would want to stymie such talks.

“From a cost-benefit perspective, the third option is the best,” Bruno stated.

“I suppose so, yes.”

The third option was obvious.

“Our best choice is to dispel the tension between us and work directly with

His Majesty rather than through Largo.”

“So it would seem.” The prince shrugged. The impression Aura’s letter had given had already driven the pair to a conclusion. The marble production was not so meaningless to Capua either. For anyone but an enchanter, they were just “slightly rare gems.” In other words, they were only valuable to those who could use them for magic: the Sharou family.

With that in mind, as soon as Capua managed to produce them en masse, Aura would be thinking of negotiations with the Sharous. It was hard to say whether the best route for her was via the Gilbelles or the Sharous—albeit indirectly through Largo. In addition, all the information they had indicated that her relationship with Zenjirou was close. The combination meant that they could easily see her wishing to either support or elevate him.

“Once they succeed in creating these, our relationship will have to get much closer. They are geographically distant, though. In that respect, ignoring His Majesty’s abilities with teleportation would be far too inefficient.”

Zenjirou could carry even a hundred marbles by hand through teleportation. However, if they didn’t use that and instead sent deliveries by land, it would be a month-long trip each way. The rainy and blazing seasons would also see to it that the journey was impossible for large portions of the year.

However they skinned it, excluding Zenjirou would do them little good. Bruno put his hand to his chin and considered.

“With the potential value on the table, a slight concession is well within allowances. An unofficial chastisement of one or two of us is nothing. The concern lies with what it is that angers His Majesty. Until we understand that, the situation is too fluid for my tastes.”

In all probability, it was the involvement of the child prince, but Bruno was wary of making such a judgment without certainty. The prince inclined his head in agreement, but also added a warning.

“That is true, but we need to ascertain whether he is *truly* angered first.”

“Indeed,” the king agreed.

Feigning anger during negotiations was a tried-and-true trick of the trade.

They needed to determine whether an angered negotiation partner was *truly* angry or feigning it, or their response could be incorrect. For the former, it was an emotional problem, so the most important part of the solution was a sincere apology. However, in the latter case, the “anger” was strictly to push negotiations, so an apology that gave them no benefit would be of no use.

Josep continued the conversation as he considered it. “We can also ill afford to forget that Queen Aura stands behind him. My personal view is that His Majesty is likely genuinely angry. However, we need to remember that if this *is* a solely emotional problem, Her Majesty gave him permission to show those emotions and cause issues in this way.”

“True. If he is angered, then it is likely to do with his previous visit. However, he showed no malice or aggression towards us before he returned to Capua temporarily. In other words, he chose not to show those emotions.”

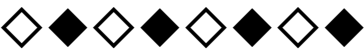
“Yes, and now that he has returned once again, he is willing to display them. That means that Her Majesty has instructed—or at least allowed—him to do so.”

“Which means that we should consider profit to be part of it as well as emotions. Fortunately, the negotiations for these jewels will benefit Capua as well. If we can satisfy His Majesty, we should be able to get a relatively good deal.”

“We need to investigate first. I will talk with Francesco, Bona, Largo, and Lucretia. They are the people who have had the most contact with him,” Josep suggested.

“Do so. It goes without saying, but take care with Largo. You are publicly estranged, after all.”

“I understand, father,” Josep said, offering a polite bow before he stood to leave.



Several days passed. During Zenjirou’s time in his annex of the Purple Egg Palace, he was unable to fully calm down.

There were currently a few others in the room with him. His maid, Ines, his

guard, Natalio, and his link to the Twin Kingdoms, Lucretia. Permission for Freya to enter the country had been granted without issue. Zenjirou had sent a soldier to Capua via teleportation with a letter to that effect. The man had returned immediately in the same way with letters from both Aura and Freya.

If there were no issues, Freya and her attendant would be arriving that day.

“Perhaps we should head to the arrival point?” Zenjirou suggested, very aware of the time. Lucretia inspected the shadow cast by the light through the window before nodding.

“We should. I will show you there.”

The dip of her head caused her bundle of hair to sway in time with her movements. She was, without a doubt, the tensest person present. Her expression as she walked ahead to guide them was wary. While her eyes were fixed forward, they weren’t focused on anything. She was likely thinking of the princess—Zenjirou’s guest—and her arrival.

Lucretia’s intuition and bias had pegged Freya as a rival the very moment the princess’s name had left Zenjirou’s lips. The information she had gathered after the fact had merely served to underscore that decision. That Freya had accompanied Zenjirou to a wedding in Aura’s place meant that she was a de facto candidate to become a concubine of his.

As someone aiming for the same thing, the sense of rivalry Lucretia felt was inevitable. However, she was more curious than anything else. This woman had managed to get into her position in less than a year since meeting Zenjirou. If possible, Lucretia wanted to be on good terms to find out how she had done so.

Three spouses would be no problem for a male royal. Once they were on equal footing as spouses, they would certainly be competing for the man’s favor. However, Lucretia’s desire for them to be on good terms was genuine. Her wishes could be summed up with the drastically selfish “Help me become his concubine. After that, I’ll kick you back down.”

The group reached the familiar room after a long walk through the corridors of the Purple Egg Palace. This was the one room in the Twin Kingdoms where teleportation was permitted. Arrivals and departures all took place here.

This meant the room was now deeply familiar to Zenjirou, and he nonchalantly checked his watch once he was inside. “Five minutes according to schedule...” he murmured to himself.

Only moments later, there was a change. With no fanfare whatsoever, the empty central area of the room was suddenly occupied by a tall, blonde warrior. She was clad in familiar leather armor and held a milky-white but yellow-tinged short spear in her right hand. There was a large bag—akin to a mountaineering rucksack—on her back.

This was Skaji, Freya’s protection and aide. The transition had made her reflexively take a combat stance. However, once she’d inspected the room and understood the situation, she soon relaxed.

“Pardon me, Your Majesty,” she apologized with a polite bow.

Zenjirou simply raised a hand in answer. “It is fine. You are the advance guard, after all. More importantly, you should move. Princess Freya will be following soon, will she not?”

“Thank you for your consideration,” the warrior replied, practically gliding away from the area.

Zenjirou could only use teleportation twice per day, so he would usually only do so once in order to have a spare usage left in case of emergency. Aura could use the spell three times at most, so she was able to regularly employ teleportation twice per day.

Before long, another figure appeared in the same way Skaji had. She had short, blue-tinged silver hair, sapphire eyes, and unblemished white skin.

Zenjirou held out a hand to the woman clad in a deep red dress, which seemed to clash with her natural coloring. “May I offer you a hand in welcome, Your Highness?” he asked with a smile.

She took his hand with a smile blooming on her own face. “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Lucretia was lost for words seeing the princess wearing the emblematic color of the Capuan royalty while being escorted by a member of said royal family. She soon recovered, though, remembering her own role as she forced a smile.

“I believe you are Princess Freya of the Northern Continent’s Kingdom of Uppasala. I am Lucretia of the Broglie family and welcome you on behalf of the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle.”

“Thank you for your greeting, Lady Lucretia. I am the first princess of the Kingdom of Uppasala, Freya. This is my associate, Victoria Kronkvist. She goes by Skaji.”

The warrior—Skaji—dipped her head at Freya’s introduction.

“It is good to meet you both, Princess Freya, Lady Skaji. I beg your pardon, but your attendants have yet to arrive. It may be an inconvenience, but please wait here for a little longer.”

The lack of attendants to greet a guest of honor from another country was somewhat impolite. However, Freya and Skaji were well aware that their arrival had been sudden.

“Very well. I will leave that to you,” Freya replied, offering a slight shrug.

In truth, the lack of accurate timekeeping and commensurately rough estimates of time in this world meant that delays like this were not exactly rare. The argument about whether the arrivals were early or the greeting was late would be endless. Zenjirou himself didn’t yet realize it but his possession of multiple timepieces accurate to the second could be a powerful weapon.

On this occasion, Aura had specified the time she would send Skaji and Freya in the letter she had sent. Having seen it, Zenjirou had been able to act in the same way he had in Japan, arriving five minutes early to receive the visitors without wasting time.

Lucretia took advantage of this resulting extra time, unable to hide her excitement as she spoke to Freya. “Your Highness, if you would permit a slightly rude question, did Her Majesty allow you to wear that outfit?”

The question was practically pointless since Aura was the only one who could have cast the teleportation spell that had brought Freya there. Still, the red dress was shocking enough that Lucretia was willing to ask the question regardless.

Freya straightened as if to show off the dress better before she answered. “Of

course. In fact, Her Majesty was the one to give me this dress. She said that as I am to be His Majesty's partner here, I would need suitable attire."

Aura had personally gifted the dress in addition to officially recognizing her as Zenjirou's partner abroad. She was being treated as a concubine in all but name even internationally now.

"That's...wonderful," Lucretia answered.

"Thank you, Lady Lucretia."

"Would you be willing to call me Lucy, Your Highness? I would like to build a closer relationship with you over the time to come."

Her words were accompanied by a meaningful glance Zenjirou's way. Freya immediately understood what she was implying.

"That is not something I can simply decide on my own," she replied with an equally meaningful look at Zenjirou.

The lack of subtlety both of them were showing was obvious even to Zenjirou with his limited exposure to such politics. The "closer relationship" Lucretia wanted was with him, not Freya. Mentioning "the time to come" when addressing someone who was all but his concubine showed that she wanted the same. Her behavior had been obvious from the beginning, so it wasn't a shock. Still, Zenjirou couldn't avoid finding it bothersome.

Leaving things as they were would make matters even more problematic, however. While Zenjirou was pondering what he could say to move the conversation along, there was a knock at the door.

"What's that?" he asked, taking advantage of the lifeline to forcefully change the subject.

Lucretia looked hurt for a moment but immediately covered it with a smile before addressing him and her maid in turn. "One moment, Your Majesty. Flora?"

"At once, Lady Lucy."

The maid headed to the door and returned after a moment.

"It would appear Her Highness's attendants are ready. May I show them in?"

Neither Zenjirou nor Freya had a reason to say no. Zenjirou exchanged a glance with Lucretia, and after she had nodded, raised his voice slightly.

“You may. Show them in.”

The woman who was shown in was clad in a purple dress. Her dark blonde hair was artfully tied up but still visibly dry. Her left eye was a vivid blue, her right eye a misty white. She looked around twenty or so. Zenjirou was at least partially familiar with her.

“Oh, Princess Margarita. Truly?” he asked in surprise.

The woman smiled and nodded in response to his shock. “Indeed. It was a direct order from King Bruno. He said that considering Princess Freya’s goals here, I would be appropriate. It is an honor to meet you, Princess Freya. My name is Margarita Sharou and I am to be your attendant for your stay here in accordance with orders from my grandfather, King Bruno.”

The young woman was known to be on a similar level to Francesco as an enchanter. She was the woman who had enchanted Zenjirou and Aura’s wedding rings. Zenjirou had visited her during his last visit and thanked her, but he had not associated with her any further.

His association with Francesco made it easy to forget, but it was far from easy to meet with such an accomplished enchanter. That was to say nothing of the fact that a royal acting as an attendant was certainly exceptional.

“A princess of the Sharou family aiding me in my stay here is an honor that is hard to articulate. I look forward to working with you, Princess Margarita.”

“Princess Margarita is known for her abilities in enchanting, rivaling even Prince Francesco’s. Is that not the case, Lady Lucretia?” Zenjirou asking for her input was what finally prompted him to realize that Lucretia—Zenjirou’s attendant—had been standing there with a hard look on her face.

“Lady Lucy,” her maid said, tugging hard on her dress.

Still incapable of hiding her surprise, Lucretia jerkily nodded her head—like a broken animatronic—before speaking. “I-Indeed, she is. I have always looked up to Mary.”

“Uh...Mary?” Zenjirou asked, taken aback by the almost familial tone.

“Ah?! N-No, I mean Princess Margarita. She is famed as one of the most capable enchanters in the Twin Kingdoms.” Her shock had originally left her lost for words and then resulted in her using a nickname for the princess.

“Ah, I suppose that most people from the Twin Kingdoms would look up to skilled enchanters. Does that mean the healers are equally respected in that way?” Zenjirou asked, offering no further allusions to the gaffe while mentally promising himself to look into it later.

It seemed that the Sharou princess was grateful for the lifeline as well. “Indeed they are. It pains me to say it, but they may be even more respected. Frankly, I feel that I cannot measure up to those capable of healing the senses, limbs, and organs,” Margarita said with an almost shy smile.

Lucretia pulled herself together and gave a slight sigh. “Princess, please take more care of yourself. Not even Prince Francesco has needed the Gilbelle family as much as you.”

Margarita chuckled slightly. “My apologies for the concern. I shall be more careful.”

The conversation sounded slightly off even to Zenjirou, who had barely interacted with her. From what he knew, the princess specialized in weapons and armor. Days of gazing into the furnace weakened her eyes, while the soot and smoke damaged her lungs. Making a mistake with the iron could even cost her a limb. It seemed that much of her earnings from the magic tools she made were used to pay for healing several such ailments each year. According to the princess herself, the loss of limbs happened when she was younger and the only treatments she had now were for her organs and senses. Those were really just pointless excuses, though.

Yup, she’s just the same as Prince Francesco and Princess Bona, Zenjirou thought to himself. She might play her part as a royal, but she’s a researcher at heart. King Bruno and Prince Josep are the opposite, true royals and statesmen. They rarely have time to make magic tools. I suppose Prince Largo would be the closest to a balance between the two sides?

Perhaps the Gilbelles were split between politics and healing as well. The

conversation had moved back to the main topic while he was considering that.

“My apologies. I got caught up in the conversation. Princess Freya, I will show you to your room. I apologize, but the lack of information has led to us placing her in a separate annex from Your Majesty. Is that acceptable?”

Zenjirou offered a faint smile at the princess’s question after the look directed towards Freya’s dress.

“That is fine. Are there any issues for you, Princess Freya?”

“It is as you say, Your Majesty,” she answered with a tactful smile.

Once Freya had been shown to her chambers, Zenjirou returned to his own and lounged around after shutting out all of the non-inner palace maids. He would have loved to have shucked off the stifling third uniform and just lay around on the sofa, but there were things he had to prioritize.

“Ines, investigate the relationship between Lucretia and Princess Margarita. Nicknames aside, her behavior when she saw the princess wasn’t normal.”

“I understand,” Ines said, offering her usual bow.

Zenjirou gave a semi-subconscious thanks as his mind moved on to the next issue. “I never would have expected her to be tasked with acting as Princess Freya’s attendant. I’m just checking to be sure, but that’s not normal, right?” he asked, casting his eyes up to Ines where she stood behind the sofa.

“Indeed. Ordinarily, it would be a role given to a high-ranking noble’s daughter like Lady Lucretia. Her Highness’s position means that, even if it is exceptional, it is not unthinkable, I believe.”

“Hm? What do you mean?”

“Her fame as an enchanter may have caused you to misunderstand,” she began explaining. “Princess Margarita is not exactly part of the main core of the royal family—albeit in a different way than Prince Francesco. What with her being a woman, married, and that marriage being to a branch family member at that, she is very low in the line of succession. Although she is a royal, it is in a surprisingly casual sense.”

“Ah, right. The Twin Kingdoms have loads of members from both families,” he

commented, realizing the thrust of his misapprehension.

He had started judging everything by the Capuan royal family's standards. However, there were only two adult members in said family, so it was an exception among exceptions. A country as vast as the Twin Kingdoms easily had—even discounting the elderly and infants—more than a dozen members of each royal family.

With such a number, there would be members of those families who were politically sidelined. It was far from unthinkable for those members to carry out miscellaneous “prestige duties.”

“Of course, Princess Margarita is the daughter of the second prince, Prince Philibert. She would ordinarily be much closer to the core. However, marrying someone as far removed as her husband also removed her from that sphere.”

In summary, Ines's explanation confirmed that the appointment was abnormal, yes, but not out of the question if there was a good reason.

Zenjirou fell into thought.

“So there's something that makes it worth treating Princess Freya as special. Maybe because she's a rare visitor from the Northern Continent? The different treatment might also be because Aura's letter and those pseudo-marbles were that big of a deal? Hmm, it might be out of the norm, but that doesn't necessarily mean it's a *bad* change. Maybe I don't need to be that paranoid about it.”

In much the same way there were limits to his time and stamina, there were also limits to his mental fortitude. He had an almost literal mountain of things he had to do and consider. Adding in curiosities would leave him without the ability to address them all in detail.

“First things first, I need to figure out the list and schedule for sending people to Capua.”

Zenjirou was the only person here who could use teleportation, so the itinerary would *have* to place him last. Francesco and Bona, Freya and Skaji, Ines and the other three maids, Natalio if possible, and Isabella and her attendants. Even if there were only three attendants, that meant more than ten people in

total. Until they were all in Capua, Zenjirou couldn't make the journey home himself.

"I wonder if I could head back partway..." he mused, mood dampened by the mandatory lengthening of his stay.

Ines considered it for a moment before giving her opinion. "I would imagine so. Although each of them has been scheduled from the outset, all are nobility and cannot be neglected. I would say that it would be acceptable for you to return temporarily to ensure the courts are ready to receive them. In fact, if there are any further additions, I would wager it would even be preferred."

"Nah, there aren't going to be any others, surely," Zenjirou said, unable to hold back a rueful grin.



The next day, Zenjirou held the meeting both Talajeh and Fiqriya—of the Elementacatto and Animeeum families—had requested.

"Your Majesty, thank you for taking the time to see us today," Talajeh began with.

"We are deeply grateful," Fiqriya added.

Zenjirou waved a hand. "It is only natural to accommodate representatives of the four dukes. That said, I am indeed possessed of little spare time. Let us cut to the root of the matter," he suggested.

Zenjirou truly was as busy as he intimated while in the Twin Kingdoms. Isabella's aid had been secured, but the specific fees and her assistants needed to be finalized. There were also the matters of Aura's letters and the pseudo-marbles that needed a considerable amount of contact with the Sharou family. He was also in the position of having to stand for Freya, who had arrived to purchase magic tools of her own.

The pair seemed to take that into account, merely exchanging glances and nods before doing as he asked.

"Then I shall do precisely that and cut to the chase, Your Majesty. Before you return to Capua, would you be willing to send Talajeh and myself there?"

Fiqriya asked. Both her face and voice seemed to hold no emotion as she asked the question.

“Naturally, we will compensate you for it,” Talajeh followed up, her own face flashing a gorgeous—if polite—smile.

That was two more people that wanted teleporting. Depending on the circumstances, it could also include protection and servants. Zenjirou held back a sigh, a slight ache beginning to build in his head.

“Would you tell me why?” he asked after a pause. “I cannot grant you permission to enter the country on my own. Even if I were to speak on your behalf to Her Majesty, it will hold little weight without a reason.”

Talajeh was the first to reply. “My objective is, simply put, negotiation. Do you recall that I wished for a magic tool imbued with a space isolation barrier?”

“Ah, I do. I believe you mentioned using it in the Elementacatto gold mines,” Zenjirou recalled.

The family had mines that supported their fiscal power, but excavating under the shifting desert sands led to constant deaths from cave-ins. Thus, Talajeh wanted a magic tool that could create protective barriers. However, making it would require the space-time magic of the Capuan royal family. It therefore inevitably required the cooperation of both an enchanter and space-time magic user to create the item and provide the spell.

With Aura’s pregnancy at present, the request was akin to asking for his aid both here and at home. He let out the sigh he had thus far suppressed before moving to confirm.

“I will probably be the one dealing with it, but I cannot be party to making a magic tool without Her Majesty’s permission,” he stressed. “On that front, arranging the negotiations and carrying them out will fall to you. I will not be assisting.”

“Of course. It is worth it.”

“The actual creation will also need either Prince Francesco or Princess Bona to provide support. Have you discussed this with them?”

“Not as yet. I intend to do so after our arrival, but I do not foresee any problems.”

“I suppose not,” Zenjirou answered. His own impressions quite agreed with that. Neither royal would turn down the prospect of creating something interesting with space-time magic. Considering Capua would be spending a great sum on Isabella’s presence, they were unlikely to object either. It would seem he had no choice but to accept the request.

Understanding that, he changed tracks and moved his gaze from the busty woman to the slighter woman at her side.

“I understand Talajeh’s goals. But what prompts your own desire to head to Capua, Fiqriya?”

Her near-stone-carved expression slipped to allow the slightest hint of a smile at his question. “I will need to explain a little of my own circumstances before it can be made clear. I am a magic researcher,” she stated.

“I have heard that. I believe you are seen as one of the most accomplished mages in the country,” he replied, recalling Lucretia’s words about the woman before him.

“I am grateful for the praise you offer,” she said. “The research I am carrying out is more specifically on the magic language. However, I have—though it pains me to admit it—come to somewhat of an impasse. I have long since hoped to borrow the expertise of Sir Espiridion, one of the leading lights in magic on the continent.”

“I see,” Zenjirou replied.

He could more or less accept her answer. He was a rank amateur given his origins in another world. That meant he didn’t have a real sense for these things, but he had heard that Espiridion was considered extremely gifted. That was precisely why he looked askance at her upon hearing her request.

“I understand the enthusiasm, but I am unsure whether that is feasible. Espiridion is an extremely busy individual.”

Someone with a post as important as the head court mage would not necessarily be able to discuss research with foreigners. Fiqriya had likely

understood that from the beginning. Her expression didn't change at all as she nodded.

“I am aware of that, of course. However, I would hope that you could ensure this reaches him in that case,” she answered. As she spoke, she placed a thick bundle of parchment in an envelope on the table. It was sealed with wax. Zenjirou had more or less memorized the four dukes' seals, but this was not the Animeeum family's. In all likelihood, it was Fiqriya's personal crest.



“And this is?” he asked.

“The record—or at least part of it—of my research until now. Several of my original incantations are included. It is impossible to fully record the language of magic in a written form, but I believe Sir Espiridion would be able to reproduce my results using it. Please ensure this reaches him.”

“Are you sure?” Zenjirou asked after a long pause. Her statement that it included original incantations had caused him to stop reaching for it and seek confirmation.

Fiqriya’s slender shoulders offered a gentle shrug before she answered. “I do not mind. They were byproducts of my research into the language and they are of no practical use. However, I believe that showing Sir Espiridion this will demonstrate that I am not simply trying to leech off his knowledge,” she declared.

A girl of around twenty years was claiming that one of the oldest mages on the continent would benefit from an exchange of information with her. Regardless of her apparently cold exterior, it seemed she was burning with passion internally.

Zenjirou nodded and had Ines take the envelope. “Very well. I will ensure that it reaches him. However, I can make no guarantee of anything further. That would mean the great expense of traveling all the way to Capua might be a fool’s errand. Are you certain that is acceptable?”

“That is fine,” she answered immediately. “My research has stalled regardless. Leaving the country for the first time may lead to some developments simply due to the change of pace.”

The fee for teleportation was a decent amount even from the perspective of royalty and nobility. Apparently, it was not a particular burden for Fiqriya of the Animeeum family, though.

“Very well. Then let us make preparations with a view to that. How many people will both of you wish to take? Too many will be impossible.”

Nobility above a certain rank would almost never travel alone. The norm was to have several people with you for both protection and to serve you. This was

even more true when the noble in question was a woman.

However, Talajeh and Fiqriya both subverted his expectations in a good way.

“I will ask for only a single person to assist with my luggage,” Talajeh said.

“I will be alone,” Fiqriya said easily.

“Are you certain?” Zenjirou asked. The two of them nodded.

“Indeed. As far as we have been able to ascertain, there is some degree of leeway in the maids and guards assigned to Princess Bona,” Talajeh began.

“We intend to have several of them assigned to us. In addition, we will have people from both of our families join the relief being sent via the land route. That will be once we transition to the active season, though.”

“Ah, so that is your plan...”

Zenjirou’s own comings and goings through teleportation had made him forget that normal soldiers made the trip between the two countries over the course of a month. For longer stays, they didn’t need to send everyone via teleportation.

“I understand the situation,” he continued. “There will be three of you sent to Capua in total. You and a subordinate, Talajeh. Then you are on your own, Fiqriya. The final decision is contingent on Her Majesty’s permission, but I assume there will be no issue with the journey itself. However, I will warn you once again that I cannot guarantee any success in either of your endeavors. It is entirely possible that you will gain nothing from the journey. The standard fee will still be payable even in that case. Is that acceptable to both of you?”

“Of course, Your Majesty. That is the nature of negotiation, after all,” Talajeh said with a sweet smile.

“That is no issue. The opportunity is enough; I shall do the rest on my own,” Fiqriya agreed, her own smile barely visible.

Once the two of them had left, Zenjirou let out a deep sigh.

“Well, that scuppers my plans. This goes beyond sending a letter with a soldier however you consider it. I will need to return to Capua and discuss it with Her Majesty in person.”

There were still knights in the room for his protection, so he couldn't speak quite as plainly as he might in the inner palace. However, he still spoke his thoughts aloud to confirm them to himself.

Ines responded, "I believe that would be for the best. Ladies Talajeh and Fiqriya are guests Capua is not expecting. Unless time is made to inform the country, preparations will be lacking. What were your thoughts on the others?"

Zenjirou considered for a few moments before replying. "Ideally, I would have Princess Isabella and her retinue sent as soon as possible. I would have Prince Francesco and Princess Bona follow. Then I would need to return and discuss the rest of our plans in detail. After Her Majesty grants permission, I would need to return and send Talajeh and Fiqriya. Princess Freya and Lady Skaji would follow once they have come to a conclusion for their purchases. The three maids and Natalio would be sent around the same time." Once he had summed that up, he added to his conclusion. "Of course, the schedule may need to change slightly in either direction depending on the situation in Capua. But you and I would be the final two."

Using all of his mana while in the Capuan royal palace would not be much of an issue, so he would be able to cast the spell twice on the final day he was in the Twin Kingdoms.

With that in mind, the one other person in need of teleportation on that last day would be Ines. She was the one he wanted to keep on hand for as long as possible.

Her voice had its usual calm tone as she replied, "Then let us make preparations in that vein. Frankly, it seems as if there will be no end to people asking, so perhaps it would be better to refuse any further requests?"

"You're right," he agreed. "We would be better served by a firm decision like that."

Proper consideration made it obvious. It was practically inevitable that when the sheer convenience of a person capable of casting teleportation was present in their own country, people would be crawling out of the woodwork for the chance to use it. The prospect of shortening a perilous month-long journey to an instantaneous trip would inspire endless hopefuls to line up for it, even if the

cost was considerable.

If he accepted each and every one of them, Zenjirou would end up stuck in the Twin Kingdoms without end. He had his own plans. Barring a request he couldn't ignore, he decided he needed to prioritize those plans.

"So, it is time to focus on my own agenda for now. Once the matter of the healer has been decided, the next step is negotiating for the cooling magic tools and Freya's purchase. Since both negotiations are for magic tools, perhaps doing so at the same time would be best?"

"Indeed. That will be easier for them as well, should you be willing."

"Make the preparations, then," he instructed her. I want things to go as smoothly as possible, so informing them ahead of time will make things easier.

"I understand," Ines replied with a short bow.

Intermission — Lucretia's Decision

Talajeh of the Elementacatto family and Fiqriya of the Animeeum family were both to head for Capua. Lucretia was unable to simply accept that when she heard it.

“Argh! I’m too late! Completely and utterly! No, Your Majesty! Don’t fall for that big-chested blonde and flat-chested girl’s tricks!” she cried, kicking her short legs and stamping her feet once she was in her own room.

The maid, behind her as ever, calmly admonished her mistress. “Calm down, Lady Lucy. After all, you would fall under the category of a flat-chested blonde trying to trick His Majesty.”

“You don’t need to *say* it!” she protested. The maid had been with Lucretia for as long as the latter could remember, so she was merciless in private. “I’m not trying to *deceive* him. If he picks me as a concubine, I will faithfully and wholeheartedly fulfill that role. I’m not like those two. Talajeh sees the world as a store with the prices on display and Fiqriya isn’t interested in anything apart from magic theory.”

“Lady Talajeh’s goal is business and Lady Fiqriya’s is discussing magic with Sir Espiridion. Perhaps considering them rivals for His Majesty is your own paranoia?”

Flora briskly stripped the dress from her mistress before using a damp cloth to wipe her face and neck. However, while Lucretia was willing to accept the assistance, she was equally happy to refute her maid’s words.

“You’re being naive, Flora. His Majesty is the prince consort of Capua. He will obviously have riches beyond compare as well as knowledge of space-time spells that others can only dream of. With how much Talajeh adores money and Fiqriya’s focus on magic research, the two of them will inevitably show an interest in him. Even if that were not the case for them personally, the families behind them will! They won’t let a chance like this pass.”

“Well, I agree in that respect,” Flora said, unable to reply any other way.

Lineal magic reigned supreme on the Southern Continent, which made international marriages frowned upon. However, Zenjirou was an exception to that. The upper echelons of the country were aware that he had Sharou blood in his veins, so the two ducal families would have no reason to hesitate in sending their own women in.

Lucretia gave a short word of thanks once the maid had removed her underwear and makeup and finally undone her hair. That finished, she started hopping up and down on the spot to loosen herself up.

“There isn’t time either. His Majesty has already announced his plans. He is aiming to leave and return once more, and his final departure date has already been decided: twenty days from now. Not even I can confidently sway his heart in such a short period.”

“I see.”

The half-smile her maid gave her hurt Lucretia’s feelings a bit. However, she decided to let it pass and continued the conversation.

“That means I need some extra time. Therefore, I’ll be heading to Capua as well!” She stuck a tiny fist up into the air, her now-loose hair swinging around her.

“Will that be possible? His Majesty’s schedule is packed until his final day here. There is not enough slack that you and I can request a teleportation as well.”

Altering his publicly announced plans would call for a good enough reason. Lucretia currently lacked both the knowledge and influence to create such a reason. Despite the sad truth smacking her upside the head, she didn’t falter.

“That matters not. Teleportation is not the only method of travel. The blazing season will be over soon. Once the active season arrives, we can join the soldiers and maids, as well as those accompanying the two hussies from the dukes, when they head there to replace those currently in Capua.”

That would mean a month-long journey by road. While she had no love whatsoever for Zenjirou, Lucretia truly did wish to become his concubine.

“Even so, you will need a reason. You have no such thing as of yet, do you?”

Flora, who would be obligated to go on this lengthy journey as well, tugged slightly harder on Lucretia’s hair than normal as a form of payback. She didn’t hide her sigh as she tied her charge’s hair back up.

“Ow! That was too hard, Flora! Anyway, that’s why I want to get closer to Princess Freya. If I can form a friendship with her, I can use ‘visiting my friend’ as a reason to head to Capua, no?”

“Your aim in that friendship would be to become His Majesty’s concubine as Princess Freya has already done. Are you intending to paint the inner palace of Capua red with blood as well?”

“That’s not my intention,” she protested. “If I can become his concubine, I’m prepared to stay on good terms with her.”

“Considering her position, I doubt she has any reason whatsoever to aid you in that quest.”

Cut down by the cruel blade of logic, Lucretia slumped with a wordless groan. As she did so, her maid offered some support while clothing her in a dress she could relax in.

“His Majesty said that both he and Princess Freya wished to purchase magic tools and are going to be negotiating at the same time. I imagine you will be able to use the time during which you will be present as His Majesty’s attendant. If you are serious about that plan, perhaps it would serve you well?”

The advice prompted the girl’s energy to return. “That’s right! I’m all ready now. I’ll do my best to get Princess Freya’s demands fulfilled and become her friend!”

Aiding someone out of utility to get closer to them was an acceptable business tactic. However, it was far from a way to make friends.

“Princess Freya’s attendant is Princess Margarita. She may be present as well, so you should be prepared for that,” Flora warned.

“Ah...”

The girl’s face froze at the princess’s name. Margarita Sharou was the

daughter of the second prince of the Sharou family, Philibert. Her mother was his legitimate wife, Yolanda. From Lucretia's perspective, Margarita was an older, blood-related sister.

Yet despite having the same parents, the older of the two was counted among the foremost enchanters, while the younger had no aptitude for it whatsoever. Although in private, the princess treated Lucretia as her younger sister, the girl in question had somewhat conflicted feelings since she simultaneously longed to have her as an older sister while also resenting that Margarita had everything that she'd ever wanted in terms of position and ability.

"It's okay...I'll do it. I can do it properly," she said, gritting her teeth as she tried to convince herself.

Chapter 3 — Complicated Negotiations

Over the next few days, Zenjirou had—much to his surprise—a significantly lighter schedule. He had one of Isabella’s maids or guards to send to Capua via teleportation each day. However, that only took a moment. He could send just one person each day, so he had no choice but to remain in the Twin Kingdoms for as many days as there were travelers. However, the time he had to commit to it was only a tiny portion of his day. The time outside of that was Zenjirou’s to do with as he wished.

Naturally, there was the party to greet Freya, which he had to attend as her partner. But other than that, he had no commitments. At least, that was true for the past few days. Now, however, he was heading to negotiate for magic tools with Freya, which was his secondary purpose for visiting the Twin Kingdoms.

The two of them sat side by side, their appointed mediators on the outside—Lucretia sat next to Zenjirou and Margarita next to Freya.

Josep was seated on the other sofa across a table from them. Zenjirou was somewhat surprised by his presence after the clear reticence he had shown the man. Was this personal touch (rather than leaving negotiations to Largo, who Zenjirou was relatively well-disposed to, or Philibert, who Zenjirou had no preconceptions about) an indication that the crown prince was willing to mend the relationship?

Zenjirou made a mental note of this complicating factor in the negotiations. At the same time, he opened up the conversation as if nothing was wrong.

“Crown Prince Josep, I must thank you for attending in person when you must be busier than almost anyone else.”

“I offer my thanks as well,” Freya added, giving a slight bow from her seated position.

“Well, this involves both you and an important woman to you, Your Majesty.

It is something I would, of course, significantly prioritize.”

“I am grateful to hear it,” Zenjirou replied as both of them nodded in thanks.

“Then let us begin. I have been told that you each wish to purchase magic tools. Would you be willing to tell me directly exactly what it is you are seeking to avoid any miscommunication?”

“We would. I shall explain first,” Zenjirou said before slowly enumerating what he wanted as the prince smiled.

Once Josep had heard the details of what both of them wanted, he put his hand to his chin and summarized the specifications.

“I see. Your Majesty wishes for magic tools to remove the bite of the blazing season. While you, Your Highness, wish for magic tools for intercontinental sea voyages.”

“Indeed. The ideal would be to be able to cool a room of Capua’s inner palace to the same extent as the Purple Egg Palace.”

“Yes, Prince Josep. Even the *Glasisir’s Leaf*—while being the pride of Uppasala—cannot trivially cross between the continents. I was hoping that the support of magic tools would be able to ease that burden in at least some small way.”

The prince hummed in thought and fell silent for a period. Then, he spoke in consideration. “Your Majesty, your request is without issue. We have a reserve of such magic tools and can hand a portion of them over to you. I do, however, need to make a single disclaimer with regard to the difference in climate between our two countries. The tools are primarily a mixture of wind and water magic. That leads to a dramatic effect in the Twin Kingdoms with our arid climate. However, Capua’s air is as damp as it is hot. You cannot expect a similar level of efficacy under those circumstances.”

“I understand. My thanks for the detailed explanation,” Zenjirou replied.

It was slightly disappointing that Capua’s humidity would lower its efficacy, but the tools should still be a great help.

“Furthermore, our preference would be for payment to be in the form of one of those jewels.” That would make it possible to restock the reserve in a much

shorter time span.

“I will consider it,” Zenjirou said, leaving himself some room for adjustment.

“Please do,” the prince replied with a smile, apparently satisfied.

Having accomplished his own goals, Zenjirou directed his gaze to the princess at his side. Taking his cue from him, Josep did likewise.

“On the other hand, your requests pose a challenge, Your Majesty,” he told Freya. “Each of the four types of magic tools you desire—water creation, purification, and manipulation, and wind manipulation—are much more difficult to part with. Frankly, water creation is out of the question. We do not currently have sufficient numbers for our own use.”

The majority of the country was desert, with few water sources. For those such as the Animeeum family with non-potable water like salt lakes, water purification was suitable and efficient. However, the demand for water *creation* where there was no water to begin with was the highest across the country as a whole.

Manufacturing magic tools took a considerable amount of time, and the only people capable of it were the Sharou family. On top of that, such tools were not everlasting. As they were used, they inevitably degraded. As a result, their water-creation tools had reached something of a plateau in terms of quantity, and that had been the case for several years. Allowing even one of them to be purchased by a foreigner would be domestically lampooned.

Once that was explained, Freya could only accept it. She moved the conversation along. “I understand. What of the purification option?” The purification tools would be the most valuable for a long sea voyage. It was, in many ways, her main goal with these negotiations, so there was more force behind her words.

The prince’s polite smile deepened as the eager princess leaned forward. He gave what was, in the end, a simply logical decision. “Indeed. Those are the most feasible—or in fact *only* feasible options. They are likewise in constant production but are not subject to the same level of demand as water-creating magic tools in the country at large. However, the Animeeum family is an exception. They have a salt lake and therefore buy up all such tools that are

made.”

“Then would I be better served by bringing my negotiations to Duke Animeeum?”

Freya’s suggestion was to buy from the Animeeum family, since they had a monopoly on the tools, rather than buying from the manufacturer directly. However, the crown prince’s face was not exactly broadcasting agreement.

“I am unsure of that. Honestly, I cannot see the family parting with any even for significant allowances.”

The Animeeum family’s coffers were supported by the water and salt they could make from the salt lake within their territory. The lake was big enough to be called an inland sea, so the more magic tools they had, the more they benefited. Josep could not imagine them surrendering that capability once they had gained it.

“If you see the purifying tools as the *only* possibility, does that mean my other requests...”

Josep nodded expressionlessly at Freya’s question. The princess’s face darkened as the conversation progressed.

“Indeed. Neither wind nor water-manipulating magic tools are feasible. We have no such examples currently. Of the tools you requested, we only have water creation and purification in existence.”

And both of those were already spoken for. Reneging on those agreements would lead to far too strong a reaction from the country as a whole.

Even so, Freya didn’t give up and continued negotiating, keeping Josep right in the middle of her vision. “I can understand your situation. However...”

Zenjirou’s esteem for the woman rose as she didn’t even glance towards him for help. He couldn’t be sure of how well-informed she was of the circumstances surrounding them, but the earlier conversation would have revealed at least some of it to her. Zenjirou had some form of jewel that the Twin Kingdoms were all too keen to obtain. He couldn’t help but think positively of her for not trying to rely on that and instead negotiating her own way through the situation.

Empathy, however, meant that his pleasant disposition made him want to offer a hand. He cleared his throat purposefully before interjecting.

“In other words, you need some form of reason. Something that those who have prepurchased the magic tools would have to accept?”

Josep seemed slightly taken aback, his eyes widening slightly. “Indeed. But water-creation tools would be difficult to permit parting with even for such a reason. Those who desire them are rather fervent in their wishes, so gaining their understanding is extremely difficult.”

For those who lived in the desert, the presence of water-creating tools or people who could cast the spell versions of them affected the number of growing children by restricting how many births were permitted. It went without saying that soothing people living on the knife’s edge like that with words alone would be extremely tricky.

“Which means that—as you have said several times—the most realistic option is purification.”

“I believe so, yes,” Josep agreed. “They are valuable magic tools in their own right, but the strongest call from them thankfully is from the Animeeum family alone. Rational discussions with the duke are more feasible. If I had a suitable reason, I would carry out the negotiations personally. You would not have to concern yourself with them, Your Highness.”

Josep’s smile deepened further as he spoke. His tone and affable expression suggested utter sincerity in his dealings.

That was exactly why Zenjirou couldn’t tell how truthful the man was being. From his perspective, Josep was shady at best. He was attempting to filter his words after having tried to expose Zenkichi to danger. It meant that even the friendly smile and consideration he was showing all felt like traps meant to ensnare Zenjirou.

Whether she knew that or not, Freya had an easy smile on her face as she replied, “I thank you for your consideration. We need to have some reason that the Animeeum family will accept, then? Unfortunately, I am rather unfamiliar with the duke, the family, and even the territory in general.”

“Well, that is only natural considering your position.”

Freya’s polite conversation was mostly to fill the air as she searched for a new path to move the negotiation along. A lifeline came from a surprising direction, though.

“In which case, perhaps I could be of assistance?” Margarita suggested. “If that would be acceptable, Prince Josep?” She was seated next to Freya in her role as an attendant, so she simply raised her hand slightly to ask for formal permission to speak.

“Oh, Margarita?” Josep asked, showing surprise for the briefest of moments. “What brought this on?”

The princess shrugged slightly as everyone’s gazes converged on her. “I am here to assist Princess Freya, so I would like to fulfill that role. The period of our agreement with the Animeeum family is half a year. I will make another in that time span so we can sell one of our current stock to Princess Freya here. That would balance things out.”

Josep’s shock grew stronger at that. “What brought this on indeed? I seem to remember you seeing it as dull and tedious.”

Mass-produced magic tools such as those for water creation, water purification, static flame, and dual burn parchment were generally the domain of relatively unskilled youths or those with little interest in enchanting. Those who focused more on politics.

Members of the family like Francesco and Margarita, who had made a name for themselves with their skill, were exempted from such quotas in favor of more bespoke and expensive items. As a matter of fact, Margarita was focused solely on her own sphere of enchanting—weapons and armor—and avoided the mass-produced items entirely.

Josep was aware of that, so his shock was inevitable. Those doubts were washed away by her next sentence, however.

“In exchange, I would ask for the object at Lady Skaji’s waist.” As she spoke, Margarita followed her habits from the forge, closing her left eye and looking at the tall warrior with only her milky right eye. More precisely, at the sword at

said warrior's waist.

"Her sword?" Freya asked, she and the warrior in question clearly confused.



The whittled tusk spear was one thing, but the sword she carried was not particularly exceptional. Of course, it was the sword of a warrior who directly served royalty, so it was by no means cheap. It was *not*, however, ornately engraved or anything of that sort. The weapon was a mass-produced blade, made under the assumption that it would be used for destruction. In fact, there were dozens of similar blades in the armory on board the *Glasir's Leaf*.

Yet, while it was a simple commodity in Uppasala, the blade took on new value on the Southern Continent.

“Unfortunately, ironwork on the Southern Continent is a level below that of the Northern Continent. From what I have heard, your own country is exalted even there. I would truly, *truly* relish the chance to own such a blade myself.” Her Margarita’s milky eye narrowed slightly as she spoke.

That was sufficient explanation for Freya to understand what the other princess was implying. “Your Majesty?” she prompted, seeking Zenjirou’s permission due to her understanding of her position.

One of the things she had going for her as a concubine of Zenjirou was Uppasala’s advanced metallurgy. Providing another country on the same continent with an example of it would also lessen its value. Frankly, it was not something she should be considering.

That said, her position was somewhat complicated. She was *also* a princess of Uppasala, not merely a concubine of the prince consort of Capua. Restricting all such interactions for Capua’s sake would also be out of place.

Freya’s entreating look meant that everyone’s gazes shifted to Zenjirou. “Let me see...” he said before starting to think. He was uncomfortable with the royals all staring at him.

The issue was the risk-to-reward ratio. Zenjirou’s wife was planning on using blacksmithing and shipbuilding from Freya’s homeland to spur Capua on. Giving an example of that blacksmithing to the Twin Kingdoms would stymie Capua’s relative growth. Were it sold to a soldier with the expectation that it would be used for destruction, things would be different.

This was being given to a proficient smith *and* proficient enchanter, though.

But while she was a skilled smith, it was unlikely Margarita would be able to replicate the skill involved with only a single example. If Freya's claims of bringing blacksmiths to Capua held true, Capua's superiority would still be assured.

On another note, the magic tool she was trying to buy would make the return trip of the *Glasiir's Leaf* safer. Her knowledge of that was why she was so eager to attain it. He couldn't completely equate intercontinental travel to the Age of Discovery in his own world, but he vaguely remembered that one ship in a few dozen on long voyages would end up resting beneath the waves during that age. If you took "a few dozen" to mean fifty, then that corresponded to a two percent chance.

Taking into account that Freya's trip from the far north of the Northern Continent to Capua was the first of its kind, the danger level was even higher. The chance of sinking might even be as high as five percent—one in every twenty.

If he had been uninvolved, or if the risk had not been life-threatening, it might not have been overly concerning. However, Zenjirou had some form of feelings for the princess, so he couldn't disregard it, particularly if his decisions could help to mitigate those risks.

Perhaps he could hand over marbles and see Freya with *all* of the tools she wanted? The marbles drastically reduced the necessary time to create the tools, so it wasn't impossible.

He swallowed and spoke. "Your agreement with Her Majesty will remain unchanged. As long as you bear that in mind, I see no issue with you acting however you wish."

That was his eventual decision. It would not be in the national interest to completely abandon her. However, he also couldn't completely support her and spend the valuable marbles. It was a half measure that left an undispellable taste of guilt but also seemed to be all Freya could have asked for.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," she said to him before turning to Margarita. "I would like to accept that offer, Princess Margarita. However, Skaji is an important part of my protection. Simply handing over her weapon would be

difficult, so I would like to wait until we can purchase a replacement.”

Her voice was energetic, and the other princess smiled widely before assenting. “Understood, Your Highness. I would be willing to exchange a sword personally. I can guarantee it would be a suitable blade.”

“Margarita?” Josep spoke softly.

She simply shrugged lightly. “Naturally, it will not be a magic tool as well, just a metal blade.”

Josep relaxed at that. Francesco and Margarita were similar people, but the latter was not as thoughtless as the prince.

With the conversation reaching a safe break point, Josep considered the situation anew. Freya had been officially gifted a dress in the royal colors of Capua by the country’s queen. The woman had sought Zenjirou’s permission before making an important decision and had been granted that permission. Coupled with that was the consideration of the danger level inherent in long-distance sea travel and the emotional look Zenjirou had favored the woman with.

With all of that combined, his conclusion was to make her even more appreciative. “Hmm. These are the limits of what the Sharou family can do to directly support you, but perhaps we can indirectly be of some further help. Each noble family and house have individual magic tools. We could allow an exemption for international sale on those. I would be willing to offer an introduction, if you would like?”

“I would appreciate that,” Freya said, instantly jumping on the suggestion.

Ordinarily, only the Sharou family was allowed to sell magic tools internationally. Other noble families such as the four dukes might be able to buy them, but they could not sell them to other nations’ royalty or nobility.

It was a system of checks and balances to prevent domestic nobility from marking them up to expand their own coffers. However, it also resulted in unusable magic tools simply being stored away. This would allow her to purchase such magic tools.

Josep took a sheet of drake parchment his attendant handed to him and ran a

pen over it with practiced movements. Once he was done, he added his signature and pressed the royal seal into it. With the document complete, he continued acting as if nothing were out of the ordinary as he called out to Lucretia.

“Lucretia, could you hand this to Her Highness?” he asked the girl at Zenjirou’s side.

“Wh— Ah, right!” She looked blank for a second before cottoning on to his aim and snapping to her feet to take the document from him.

She was here in her position as Zenjirou’s attendant. That made her unsuitable for the role, but there was a reason for him to call her for it. She spoke nervously to Freya as she handed the document over.

“Your Highness. I understand your situation from the earlier conversation. I believe I may be able to be of some small help. I can talk to Marquis Broglie, so would you be willing to negotiate with our family first?”

The suggestion was a welcome offer to Freya. The Broglie family was a noble family that went right back to the country’s founding. Whether they would sell to her or not, it was easy to imagine them having many magic tools.

“Very well, I will prevail upon you then, Lady Lucretia.”

The conversation was all going well. Zenjirou’s distrust ratcheted another level higher as Josep watched the proceedings with a friendly smile.



Several days later, Freya found herself in the Broglie estate within the capital.

Her trip via carriage from the Purple Egg Palace had led to her experiencing the country’s dry heat for the first time. She’d spent much of the trip slumped over, panting like a dog, but the estate was of a noble family as old as the country itself.

Fortunately, the rooms were furnished with magic tools on a similar level to the palace, so Freya’s disgrace remained unseen.

Incidentally, her presence was as a princess of Uppasala, and she already had permission to carry out negotiations, so Zenjirou was not accompanying her.

Therefore, she was not wearing the red dress from Aura, but a more familiar faint blue one.

With her trusted warrior at her back, Freya seated herself politely on the sofa across from a man who was between his middle ages and later years. His ashen hair was swept back and his gray eyes were slightly closed. It all gave him the air of a distinguished gentleman.

There was a blonde girl at his side, her hair tied at the side of her head. This was Lucretia Broglie. She was temporarily absent from her role at Zenjirou's side to act as an intermediary between Freya and her adoptive father. Therefore, it was she who first broke the silence.

"Allow me to make the introductions, Your Highness. This is the current head of the Broglie family, Marquis Luchino. Father, this is the first princess of Uppasala, Princess Freya Uppasala."

Both Freya and Luchino greeted each other with smiles.

"My name is Freya, Marquis Broglie. It is an honor to meet you."

"Likewise. I am glad for the opportunity to meet you, Princess Freya. My name is Luchino, and I lead this family."

Their ages, sexes, and birthplaces were all different. However, both were used to social etiquette, so the conversation went extremely smoothly between the two of them as they exchanged some small talk.

"I see," the marquis said after the conversation had progressed somewhat. "The Northern Continent is truly advanced. The concept of a university is awfully intriguing."

"While it is not excessively so, it is true that our differing histories have led to our cultures developing differently. Our magic has lagged behind in that way, after all."

"Is magic not an area of study at those universities? In which case..."

The discussion continued, both of them learning their conversation partner's rhythm before the marquis brought up the main topic.

"Is that the reason behind your desire for magic tools?"

The talk's progress had made it clear the topic was on its way, so there was no shock on the princess's part as she agreed.

"Indeed. Our *Glasisir's Leaf* is the cutting-edge of ship technology in both Uppasala and on the continent as a whole. On a technical level, I could not ask for a better ship. However, there are still risks to intercontinental crossings. If we are to improve things, we believe our only current recourse is magic."

Luchino nodded at her smooth statements, his face serious. "I see. Your claims certainly do not lack persuasiveness. After all, you have made the crossing yourself. I can understand your desires."

"Then do you possess anything suitable?" Freya asked.

The marquis didn't react hastily to Freya trying to bring the negotiations to a close. "I am considering things favorable. After all, I know little of the Northern Continent. This document gives us Prince Josep's permission to sell magic tools. However, I may refuse to do so if it seems liable to harm my country, if you will pardon me for saying so. I have several questions I would like to ask about the continent, if you would indulge me?"

He straightened and Freya seemed slightly overwhelmed by his presence, adjusting her own position.

"I would indeed," she replied.

"Then the first thing I wish to discuss is that Uppasala's first ship to arrive on the Southern Continent is yours, but that is not the case for the Northern Continent as a whole. How do those ships increase their own chances?"

The question was an obvious one to ask, and Freya shrugged slightly. "Those ships belong to countries under the church's influence. My own country is not particularly associated with them, so I cannot say with real certainty, but I do not believe they make any special allowances. I believe they send out a number of ships, assuming that at least some will capsize during the crossing." She paused briefly before continuing. "However, Uppasala is one of the most northerly countries on the continent. It is possible the more southerly countries have more favorable conditions."

While Uppasala was one of the most technologically advanced countries, they

were only just relevant on the continental scale. There was a vast difference in population between it and the most powerful countries. Countries that were blessed with both the resources and manpower to make use of them could take the occasional loss of ships on the chin, but Uppasala could find itself at a standstill if they tried the same method.

If you could bet a million yen at a time with a seventy percent chance of a win, someone rich with a hundred million yen could just keep betting with an eye on long-term reward, whereas someone with a mere five million yen could find themselves easily bankrupt if the odds were not on their side.

Uppasala was not in a position where it could gamble on intercontinental trade. They needed more certainty.

“I see. So could your country not simply leave the intercontinental trade to those others and reap the rewards indirectly?”

“Unfortunately, the more intermediaries there are, the lower the margins get and the more annoyances come forth. After all, as they say, if you’re going to do it, you should do it ra— Pardon me,” she said, cutting herself off. Skaji had gone an ashen gray, but fortunately, the Broglie family head seemed to have not caught the gist of her statement. She centered herself before continuing. “W-Well, we would like nothing more than to establish intercontinental trade of our own.”

“I see...”

Silence reigned for a while. The marquis was considering his response while the princess was simply waiting for it. The ball was in his court. She waited nervously for a long time before Luchino spoke.

“I understand the overall situation. I believe we have something perfect.”

“Thank you, Marquis,” Freya replied with a wide smile.

Luchino cleared his throat and dampened the mood slightly. “However, there is a problem. This magic tool would certainly be a great help to you. The issue is that it is also a valuable heirloom that has been passed down in our family for generations. It is not something I can surrender for a paltry sum.”

Freya was not the kind of negotiator to promise any amount in payment.

“Well, I would be beyond grateful to receive such an item. I would like to see it and have a full explanation before we continue. Would that be possible?”

Any payment would have to be after she knew what she was paying for. The marquis took no offense at the implication, simply nodding.

“Of course. Bring the item from the neighboring room.”

The second sentence was directed towards the five male attendants present. They vanished next door for a while before reappearing carrying a massive item between the five of them.

“That is...” Freya was lost for words, her eyes wide at the massive size of the magic tool.

“Good work,” Luchino told them. “Place it next to the table. Carefully.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Pardon us.”

The item went down between the two negotiators with a thud. It looked very similar to a globe. There was a round pedestal at its base, with a white sphere atop it, held at points on its top and bottom. The sphere was constantly spinning, likely through some form of magic.

Of course, it only *looked* like a globe. It was not a navigation aid, the white sphere being no map. The sphere alone looked to be around two meters in diameter and hewed from some form of white rock. With that in mind, it was hardly a surprise it had taken five men to carry it in.

“What kind of magic tool is this?” Freya asked, icy-blue eyes focused on the item with interest.

“It is called the Lulled Sea. It would perhaps be easier to demonstrate than explain. Men, open the window and bring some water.”

The attendants immediately set about carrying out the orders with words of acknowledgment. The window was thrown open and a large metal bowl of water was placed alongside the magic tool. The hot wind carried the desert sand with it, and Freya narrowed her eyes slightly against the stinging dust.

The wind ruffled her short hair, and the marquis nodded in satisfaction at the

sight before standing up. Then, he moved in front of the tool before speaking.

“Fix the current situation in your mind. I will demonstrate it now. You place your hand upon it like this and say ‘*lull*.’”

The final word was in the language of magic. The tool immediately glowed a dull white. The light faded and the sphere’s rotation stopped completely. At the same moment, its effect became clear.

The unpleasant breeze blowing into the room had stopped entirely.

“What?” Freya said in shock.

Skaji simply grew warier as the marquis smiled proudly and rolled his sleeve up.

“This will be even clearer. Watch closely.”

With that, he slapped the palm of his hand onto the surface of the water in the bowl.

There was—obviously—a loud splash, but then the water went back to its prior state as if nothing had happened. Both Freya’s and Skaji’s eyes were wide at this point. It was a truly unnatural sight.

He had slapped the water with a significant amount of force. The splash had only lasted an instant, though, and the water had returned to its flat state immediately afterward, not even rippling. Frankly, they doubted their eyes.

Luchino began explaining to his shocked guests. “The Lulled Sea acts exactly as its name implied. Within its area of influence, the movement of wind and water is greatly restricted. The wind will calm and the water’s surface will not sway. Not even rain will fall in the area. However, it does not inhibit breathing or drinking, so you need not concern yourself with that.”

“May I test it for myself?” Freya asked after a long pause, still unable to fully believe what she was seeing.

“By all means,” the Marquis answered easily.

“Princess, allow me.”

“Ah, yes. Carry on, Skaji.”

“Excuse me,” Skaji said after gaining permission. She followed up the statement by using the butt of her short spear to strike the water’s surface.

The results were much the same as before. The impact led to the water sloshing into a splash, but it flattened out unnaturally quickly, instantly returning to a static pool. She followed that up with several other attempts, stuck the base of her spear into the water and swirled it around, then scooped up a palmful of water and dropped it back into the pool.

While Skaji worked, Freya took her teacups and did some experimenting of her own. “I can drink the tea as normal,” she remarked. “Yet if I tilt or shake the cup, the surface settles just the same. Blowing on it only causes ripples for an instant before it lulls again.”

Additionally, she had blown as hard as she could, with the cup—and therefore her hand—right next to her mouth. Despite that, the breath didn’t actually reach her hand. It would appear that the artifact did indeed restrict the wind as well.

The pair’s trials solidified the idea in their minds that the item truly worked as the marquis had described. Once the princess’s eyes were gleaming, Luchino offered up the clincher.

“The effect propagates over a significant area. It encompasses the entire estate, in fact. I do not know precisely how big the *Glasiir’s Leaf* is, but I would imagine that it would entirely fall within its area of effect. The effect will persist long enough to complete basic tasks. Once it has been used, it cannot be used again for a period of time—that is something to remain aware of. The only way to determine exactly how long the effect persists and how long it remains inoperable is through practice.”

A hint of wariness entered the princess’s eyes. The magic tool had a wide area of effect where wind and water could be brought entirely under her control. It was clear just how valuable such an item would be for a long sea voyage. If they were caught up in a dangerous storm or on the verge of being struck by a towering wave, the tool could call a temporary halt to the situation.

Storms and waves damaged ships. Sudden storms made it impossible to furl the sails in time. If a storm lasted for too long, the sailors would reach the limits

of both their mental and physical stamina. Possessing this “Lulled Sea” would be an immeasurable boon. When a ship was damaged by a storm, it was usually a storm of considerable size. Carrying out repairs was the only choice, and deaths were practically inevitable. If the Lulled Sea effect was active, the storm would be forced to temporarily abate and repairs would be feasible. Even during rapid-onset storms that precluded stowing the sails, the process would be a much calmer affair.

The biggest impact would be during prolonged periods of bad weather. They would be able to give themselves a temporary reprieve. Even veteran sailors could find their spirits breaking during an extended encounter with bad weather. So telling them to keep at it for just a little longer when a guaranteed rest was on hand could stretch that stamina out for a shockingly long period.

Storms traveled over the sea as well, so there was also the possibility that the bad weather might pass over them while the magic tool was active. The combination of their latest shipbuilding techniques, the “Lulled Sea,” and a magic tool for water purification could dramatically minimize the dangers of an intercontinental crossing.

It was something Freya would practically kill for. And it was for precisely that reason that her wariness was inescapable.

“Why do you have such a magic tool, if I may ask?”

It was practically tailor-made for sailors on long voyages. Freya was not dense enough to think of it as merely a fortunate coincidence.

The marquis must have predicted her response. He remained gentlemanly as he replied with a very measured tone, “Truly, it is mere happenstance. It is a magic tool we traditionally hold. However, I felt that it would serve its purpose with you better than being locked away in our storerooms. Therefore, I prepared it once I heard from Prince Josep.”

“A traditional magic tool, you say? Frankly, it seems to have been specifically created for us.”

With Freya’s unfamiliarity with enchanting, it was hardly surprising that she would make such an assumption. The tool was so perfectly suited for her purposes that happenstance was not a sufficient explanation. It was even called

the Lulled *Sea*. Why would a country such as the Twin Kingdoms—which had no sea—produce such an item?

“I suppose you could simply take it as being born under a fortunate star. Or perhaps you could call it fate.”

“That would be a welcome fate indeed. If that fortune continued, perhaps it would be possible to purchase more than one of these?”

As Freya requested further negotiations with a smile, the marquis’s own smile took on a rueful tinge.

“That would, unfortunately, be impossible,” he replied with a shake of his head. “This is a legacy. There are none within the Sharou family capable of replicating it.”

“A ‘legacy?’”

Luchino nodded upon seeing her confusion. “Indeed. Tell me, Your Highness, are you aware of how our country came to be? Our ancestors migrated here from the Northern Continent.”

“Oh?”

The marquis knew that she had inferred what he was implying and nodded in satisfaction before continuing. “The path you sailed was likewise sailed by our forebears, centuries ago. We refer to magic tools created before that crossing as ‘legacies.’ The crossing and nomadic lifestyle that followed saw the loss of much of the construction methods for those legacies, along with the items themselves. This is one of the few remaining examples of them.”

Why did a magic tool so perfectly suited to Freya’s current situation exist? Well, for no other reason than the ancestors of the Twin Kingdoms had overcome practically identical challenges.

“And you are truly willing to bequeath such a treasure to us?”

Anecdotally, this magic tool would be on par with a royal treasure—far beyond a simple heirloom for a marquis’s family. If the tale was true, the strangest thing was that it was in the Broglie family’s possession. Surely it should have been sealed away in some vault in the Purple Egg Palace.

However, the man's polite smile remained in place as he responded. "There are no issues on that front. As I intimated earlier, Prince Josep offered this option."

"Still, even disregarding historical significance, its value as a magic tool is equally significant. I may not know much about magic tools, but even I can tell that. What were your thoughts on cost?"

Unsaid but not unheard was the expectation it would be a huge sum. However, the marquis simply let his smile widen.

"Payment would not be required. This is a symbol of friendship between the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle and the Kingdom of Uppsala. However, as a symbol of *friendship*, we would ask that you refrain from selling, transferring, or disposing of it," the gentleman said brazenly. He had apparently let his earlier statement about it requiring a suitable payment slip his mind.

Freya's wariness ratcheted up another level.

"I see. A symbol of friendship..." Her lips curved into a smile as well, but her thoughts were racing behind her pleasant expression.

Marquis Broglie had called it "a symbol of friendship between the Twin Kingdoms of Sharou-Gilbelle and the Kingdom of Uppsala."

Ah, I see, she thought, able to understand why he had picked now to suddenly try and push things along.

When Zenjirou had been there, Freya had presented herself as concubine presumptive of the Kingdom of Capua. Her outfit of a red dress—the royal family's emblematic color, gifted to her by Queen Aura herself no less—had shown that all the more. However, Zenjirou was not at her side now. Her dress was not red either, but a light blue fabric. If they missed the opportunity to negotiate with Freya as a representative of Uppasala, who knew when their next chance would be? With that in mind, the marquis's rush and largesse became understandable.

His statements that this is due to Prince Josep's permission means I can likely assume the Sharou family are also in agreement. Actually, even if his family has been around since the country was founded, such a magic tool is more than they

would ordinarily be allowed to part with. Perhaps I should assume that the Sharous are pulling the strings after all.

The Twin Kingdoms wanted “friendship” between the two nations that much. They possessed twin lineal magics as well—enchanting and healing—so such a relationship was certainly no detriment to her as the country’s first princess. The question was: what about as a concubine of the Prince Consort of Capua?

“I am sure my father and brother would be overjoyed to hear of this friendship. However, I foresee a great deal of difficulty in transporting a magic tool of such stature to Capua. I am...unsure of how I would explain it to His Majesty.”

“Ah, indeed. As you are aware, the Twin Kingdoms is a landlocked nation. With the oceans separating us, we would need the cooperation of a country on the Southern Continent that possessed ports of its own. We would be much obliged if you were to discuss such arrangements with Capua.”

Freya’s confusion grew even more as the marquis acted as if mentioning Zenjirou’s name—something that was a subtle warning—was a cause for cheer.

“However,” he continued, “this is too large for His Majesty to carry via teleportation. It will need to be sent over land. Fortunately, the blazing season will be over in the near future and the relief force will be heading for Capua. The men can take this with them.”

“Are you certain?” Freya asked after a long pause.

“Indeed. Leave its transport to us.”

His statement firmly cemented her certainty that this initiative came straight from the Sharou family. They were the ones sending the relief to Capua. Additionally, they would be leaving as soon as the seasons changed—a mere dozen or so days from now. Adding the transport of something the size of the Lulled Sea would be beyond the power of a mere noble like the marquis. Yet, he had made the declaration. If he hadn’t already made such arrangements with the Sharou family, the timeline would have been exceedingly tight. It seemed there was no other explanation.

When also taking into account they were not trying to hide this involvement

from Capua, it seemed to imply that the Twin Kingdoms was not attempting to go over their heads to negotiate with Uppasala directly.

In that case, she had no reason to refuse, either in her position as a princess of Uppasala or as a concubine to the prince consort of Capua.

“I understand. In that case, I would be delighted to accept your favor. However, I must ask if you are certain about the lack of compensation.”

With Freya seeking confirmation, the man put his hand to his chin and made a show of thinking things over. Then he played the part of having a sudden burst of inspiration.

“I know. If it would make you more comfortable, then perhaps you would be willing to offer a few words of advice in place of payment?”

“Advice?” she asked.

Luchino indicated the blonde girl at his side, slapping her on the back with a grin.

“Indeed. My daughter Lucretia here has actually been given the honor of working as His Majesty Zenjirou’s attendant while he is present.”

“I am aware of that, yes,” Freya answered. Her gaze shifted to Lucretia, and the smaller girl offered a slight bow of her head.

The marquis’s hand remained on his daughter’s back as he continued. “His Majesty is an exceedingly open-minded person, but I would prefer to keep this between you and me. Lucretia’s feelings have taken a ‘special’ turn in her service of him.”

The girl cast her eyes down and flushed. She was the very picture of an awkward girl who had seen her love divulged. Even Freya found herself admiring the performance. She had seen many such plays in her homeland, but this was the first she’d seen carried out so flawlessly. The girl’s understandable behavior would usually be seen as almost cloying, but in Lucretia’s case, it managed to give off a more “adorable” impression.

At least somewhat impressed by the effort, Freya took the matter of the magic tool into account as she offered some simple advice. “This is all purely

hypothetical. If Lady Lucretia's 'special' feelings are what I am envisioning, the only advice I can give would be to forget them as quickly as possible. His Majesty only returns those special feelings to Queen Aura."

Her blunt statement caused Lucretia's head to snap up in protest.

"That cannot be true. After all, you are here as well, are you not?" Her face had reddened in embarrassment for a moment, but that flush was nowhere to be seen now. Instead, her big, blue eyes were shining in a fiery challenge.

Freya didn't miss a beat, acting almost as if that was exactly the reaction she had expected. "I speak no falsehood. His Majesty's feelings belong to Queen Aura alone. They differ from what he offers me, at the very least, and I cannot see them reaching a confluence. However, and this is *truly* hypothetical, if what you seek is not special *feelings* but a special *position*, then I believe I can offer some words of advice. As someone who has already reached that position."

"If you wou— Urk!" Lucretia had been about to rocket forward and leap into the conversation, but her words were abruptly cut off. The hand the marquis had placed on her back had likely closed to pinch or scratch her.

The faint sheen of tears in the girl's blue eyes left Freya fairly sure of her hypothesis. She could certainly understand why the man would stop her from speaking. He had only just used the pretense of Lucretia falling in love with Zenjirou as an explanation for why she wanted to become his concubine. Despite that, she had been all for taking Freya up on her offer for advice that had nothing to do with such feelings being returned but rather would allow the girl into a similar position as the princess.

It was all too easy to understand why her adoptive father would physically stop her from breaking the masquerade. Pretending not to notice would be kinder, and was more convenient for Freya herself as well, she decided. She followed through, feigning ignorance as she spoke.

"That may have been somewhat rude, as you wish for a more emotional connection. My apologies for the lack of tact."

Lucretia's face twisted at the closing of the conversation. Sighing at his adoptive daughter's negotiations already having broken down, the marquis tossed her a lifeline.

“Actually, I would like to hear what you have to say. While it is not what Lucretia wants, a special position would allow her to remain at His Majesty’s side. Such an opportunity would be indispensable for any possibility of reciprocation, and while I am her father, I am also the head of the Broglie family. I can hardly allow a chance to have my daughter at His Majesty’s side pass.”

In this way, Lucretia’s interest in Zenjirou could be taken as emotional, with the political interest being on the family’s head. Despite that stance, the girl’s earlier reaction and attempts to entice Zenjirou throughout his stay made it obvious that Lucretia didn’t want him as a man, but as the prince consort.

In that respect, Freya and Lucretia had started from the same position. She could hardly censure the other for that, but she was still far from a latecomer bringing chaos to the royal palace. Therefore, while she could sympathize with Lucretia, she was concerned and made sure to offer her warnings too.

“Very well. Put bluntly, those wishing to become one of His Majesty’s concubines should seek not to convince him but Her Majesty instead. With that taken into account, there are two major factors if you wish to pursue this path. The first is to not make him ill-disposed towards you. The second is earning Queen Aura’s favor.”

“Please continue,” Lucretia asked after a moment, clearly swallowing a multitude of questions.

“When all is said and done, Queen Aura is the country’s monarch. She is a wise, dependable politician. If she believes it will serve Capua as a whole to a significant degree, she would not only *allow* a marriage but actively work for it.”

Essentially, any blitzkrieg attacks on Zenjirou—the figurative stronghold—were doomed to failure. Instead, one should focus on bridging the figurative moat—Aura—and showing their concubinage to be irrefutably to the country’s benefit.

It was a blunt method, but entirely true in Zenjirou’s case. He didn’t want any concubines. However, that was an emotional reaction. Rationally, he knew that as a royal in this world, it was the norm for him to have several, especially when one took into account that he and Aura were the only practical members of the

royal family.

Zenjirou taking a concubine was more than “preferable,” it was an obligation. With that truth and his rational understanding of it, anyone he could stand who would serve the country well would have a chance.

All Freya was doing with her advice was providing a vague summary of what she herself had done. Still, it was entirely convincing. Lucretia had been utterly taken in by the princess’s words.

“I see. Thank you for your guidance,” the marquis replied, lightly smacking his daughter’s back to bring her to her senses before he bowed and directed a fond glance her way. “As representatives of the Twin Kingdoms, we of the Broglie family are honored to present the Lulled Sea as a symbol of friendship between our nations. Its size means that it can only be transported by land, but its value as a family heirloom means we must appoint someone from the Broglie family to oversee its carriage. Lucretia, are you prepared to take on such a role?”

“I am, father!” she replied instantly. “I will carry out this duty!” Thus, Lucretia Broglie’s journey to the Kingdom of Capua was decided.

With the conversation over, Luchino was left alone in the room. It went without saying that Freya and Skaji had already left, but Lucretia had her duties as Zenjirou’s attendant, so she too had hurried back to the Purple Egg Palace.

“It would seem I have managed to carry out my own duty as well,” the marquis mused to himself as he looked at the huge magic tool enshrined on the carpet.

The sound of the door to the room unlatching reached his ears. He was not surprised, though, simply moving to greet the man who entered from another room.

“Ah, Prince Josep. My thanks for coming all this way,” he said, preparing to kneel.

The man in question waved a hand to stop him and rather casually made his way over to the sofa opposite the marquis. “Do not bother yourself. You know my presence here is secret. Regardless, the Lulled Sea has been passed from being the Broglie family’s heirloom to being a symbol of friendship between us

and Uppasala. Well done.”

“Thank you. It is a weight off of my shoulders. I know that it was for the Twin Kingdoms, but it has been nerve-wracking holding on to a treasure from the country’s founding.”

The prince chuckled. “You have always been such an aid.”

As the conversation implied, the Lulled Sea was not an heirloom belonging to the Broglie family. As Freya had intuited, it was actually a national treasure that had been locked away by the Sharou family.

Playing it in this way and handing the item over through the Broglie family had been done for no other reason than to provide support for Lucretia. The direct chain of ownership was to Uppasala, but Capua was in the midst of trying to form a trade agreement with that country as well. Giving the tool to Freya would indirectly benefit Capua greatly—that much was not in question. It was a trick to raise the apparent value Lucretia represented.

“For both her and the country as a whole, I would greatly welcome Lucretia marrying His Majesty. Bona would work too, but there appear to be no developments on that front,” the prince said.

The Sharou family didn’t care who was chosen, but they wanted someone with blood ties to their line to marry him. Still, the Lulled Sea was not connected with that plan. The important thing was that it had been officially gifted to Uppasala as a symbol of friendship between their nations.

“Uppasala accepted the legacy of the White Empire as a symbol of friendship. We can be almost certain they are removed from the church’s influence,” the crown prince said, his lips curling into a grin.

The marquis didn’t seem so sure. “I am aware of the ties between our ancestors and the church as left in their writings. However, that was hundreds of years ago. They have had no influence on us in the time since we built this country in the sandy wastes of the continent. Are you certain the tumult you foresee will actually arrive?”

“It will. I am sure of it,” the prince said firmly. “Princess Freya’s land is advanced, but it is not a powerful country in its own right. There are nations

that rival them in technological prowess and others that are far more powerful still. I believe it is only a matter of time before those countries cross the ocean on ships akin to the *Glafir's Leaf*."

The marquis gulped as the prince continued.

"I do not know what stance the church takes on the Southern Continent and the countries that call it home today. However, that is not the main concern. Invasion and trade are possible responses. If the former is more beneficial, then people and countries alike will select it. Therefore, we need to be strong enough to ensure that trade is seen as more beneficial, with invasion not being worth it."

Josep felt that the Twin Kingdoms alone would never be able to amass enough strength to make that the case. King Bruno felt the same way. Above all else, the Twin Kingdoms was a landlocked country. The western countries with ports would be first in the firing line. Once they fell and provided a beachhead, further developments would become much more difficult to handle.

"A friendly nation on the Northern Continent in the form of Uppasala will keep them in check, while Capua will take the brunt of any invasion. We would then support both of them from behind. Or rather, that would be the ideal, but it is likely too one-sided," the king-to-be mused with a grin.

Josep saw huge ships from the north coming to pressure them as all but an inevitability. However, it was nothing that would happen in the next year or two. It would be in ten to twenty years, when Carlos Zen and Vittore were grown men.

During that time, the Southern Continent needed to grow in strength so that it could stand against such a harvest from the Northern Continent. Their nations needed to grow in financial, military, and cultural power until they could match their potential enemies.

"That is precisely why I wish to secure a steady supply of the jewels that would make the mass production of magic tools a reality," the prince said, his eyes gleaming with thoughts of the future.



Some time prior—while Freya was absent and negotiating over magic tools—Zenjiro was in a now-familiar room of the Purple Egg Palace, sending the day's candidate to Capua via teleportation.

The woman standing before him had chestnut-colored hair with silver powder shining through it—Princess Bona. They had often met in Capua, but outside of evening events at the palace during Zenjiro's stay in the Twin Kingdoms, they had not really had a chance to talk.

Of course, it was the first time she had been home in quite a while, and she had been freed of her obligation to supervise the problem prince, spending her time being spoiled by her parents instead, so Zenjiro had avoided inconveniencing her. Regardless, he spoke pleasantly to her now that he had the chance to do so properly.

"I shall be sending you back to Capua presently. Are you ready?"

Teleportation was instantaneous. But the cost of it meant that if you forgot something, you could not go back to fetch it.

In response, Bona spread the big bag she had been holding and checked its contents. "Please wait a moment. Vise, hacksaw, chisels... One, two, three... They're all there. The charm from mother, father's..."



Once she was done, the princess methodically closed the bag and stood.

“Thank you for waiting. I have everything I need.”

Her earnestness and honesty caused Zenjirou to relax into a smile as he spoke.

“That is good to hear. Was the time spent back here useful?”

“It was! It had been a while since I was able to see my family, and Princess Margarita offered me some guidance. It was fruitful indeed.” Bona smiled as she spoke. Her grin was honest, and there was no need to read into it.

“Hm? Princess Margarita guided you?”

“She did. She was the one who taught me enchanting. Ordinarily, someone’s mother and father will teach them, but my position complicated that somewhat.”

“Ah, I see.”

Bona—despite being born a low-ranking noble—had awoken the lineal magic of enchanting. She had no family who could teach her, so someone else had needed to do so. Apparently, Margarita had taken on that role.

“I must say, you seem to have focused on a very different specialty,” Zenjirou commented. “I believe I heard you were most skilled with jewelry.”

Margarita, in contrast, was a specialist in metalwork like swords and shields. For student and teacher, their focuses could not be more different.

“Her Highness is somewhat of a bad example in that respect. Seeing her beating at the metal like a demon does not dispose one to follow her path,” the princess answered, averting her eyes.

Apparently, Margarita’s passion for her craft was such that even Bona couldn’t countenance it.

Thus far, Zenjirou was rather well-disposed towards the more engineering-focused individuals of the Sharou family—like Francesco, Bona, and Margarita—and more poorly disposed towards the politicians like Bruno and Josep. It seemed now that perhaps he should have pitied the latter group.

While he let those thoughts swirl through his mind, he couldn't spend too long talking with the princess. "I asked Prince Francesco this yesterday, but I wish to also ask you. There has been a slight change of plans, and I will be returning personally tomorrow. If you get the opportunity, please inform Her Majesty of this."

"I understand. I will do so."

Her acceptance prompted a relieved smile from Zenjirou. He had been somewhat nervous about entrusting the message to Francesco and no one else. The prince was so airheaded that Zenjirou could see him just chuckling and saying something along the lines of, "Oh, right, you did tell me that. I forgot."

"Then I will send you on now. Are you ready?"

"I am," Bona said, tightening her grip on the bag to avoid dropping it.

Zenjirou put his hand on her shoulder and closed his eyes before uttering the incantation. His almost daily use of the spell meant that—for the room in Capua's palace at least—he didn't need to rely on the printout.

"Send all things in the space that I envision to the place that I desire. As compensation, I offer—"

This time, he succeeded on his first attempt, even without the crutch of the photo.

Once Bona had vanished, he let out a sigh of relief and rolled his neck to loosen his shoulders. "Phew... Okay then."

With his quota fulfilled for the day, he returned to his room. Fortunately, perhaps, both his attendant and guest were at the Broglie estate. He couldn't go wandering around without Lucretia as a mediator, but within the annex itself, he was much freer to act as he wished.

He started by immediately listening to the information that Ines had gathered.

"To cut to the chase, Lady Lucretia was adopted into the Broglie family. Her actual parents are the second prince, Prince Philibert and his wife, Lady

Yolanda. By blood, she is a princess of the Sharou family and Princess Margarita's sister."

"So why was she adop— Yeah, I don't need to ask, do I?" Zenjirou flashed between surprise, questioning, and then came to a conclusion on his own. Ines nodded in agreement.

"You are likely correct. Lady Lucretia showed no talent in enchanting. She therefore lost her qualification as royalty and became a mere noble."

It appeared that this wasn't even an open secret but something that was public fact. However, it wasn't particularly proper to publicize it around the person in question, so it hadn't reached Zenjirou before now.

"Ah, I see. And she knows she would have been royalty but now is just a high-ranking noble who serves other royals. Yeah, I'm pretty sure I know why she's so keen to get close to me."

"Indeed. The rest of this is rumor, but apparently, she would be able to rejoin the Sharou family if she managed to become your concubine."

"Hm? The Sharou family? Not the Capua family?" Zenjirou asked.

"Indeed," Ines replied clearly. "The Sharou family. In the past, there have been people who ought to have been able to use the lineal magic of the Twin Kingdoms but could not, for whatever reason. Those people—despite being incapable themselves—are just as capable of passing the ability on as those from other bloodlines who gained it."

Fulfilling both of those archetypes would be Lucretia and Bona. Lucretia had been born to the right bloodline but could not use enchanting. Bona had been born as a low-ranking noble but inherited the genetic throwback. While it had elevated Bona herself greatly, her mother's potential was considered on the same level. It was equally likely that any children of either Bona or Lucretia could become enchanters.

"Therefore, those like Lady Lucretia are highly sought after in marriage, in their own way. Additionally, if adoptees like her are able to marry into *royalty*, then they return to the rolls of their own royal family and marry as a daughter of that family, a princess."

It could be considered something of a leg up for marriage and perhaps also served to protect against the risk of the adopting family attempting to seize power.

Whatever the case, the only method for a once-royal of the Twin Kingdoms who had thus lost their status to regain it was to marry a royal. In Zenjirou's case, things would be complicated by said royal not being from the Sharou family, but from the Capua family. Still, it would likely be treated in the same way.

"I can understand that. I don't know whether she's motivated by pride, ambition, or maybe even affection for her blood family, but I can at least see why she's so frantic about it."

He had found dealing with her to be a touch difficult, but understanding some of the subtleties of her situation made a lot of those negative feelings fade away. Naturally, that didn't mean he wanted to offer himself up as a sacrifice for the girl. He might have accepted Freya without being able to escape it, but that was already enough for him to deal with.

"Indeed. I therefore believe she is unlikely to give up. Take care."

"I'm not going to be here much longer," Zenjirou said doubtfully.

The maid remained calm as she warned him, "I believe she will find some reason to come to Capua."

"So I'd be sending *her* as well?"

Ines tilted her head slightly at his resignation. "I am not sure of that. I think she will definitely find some reason to head for Capua. The finer details of the events so far—along with her actions—appear to show the Sharou family supporting her in her endeavors."

After all, it had been King Bruno who had assigned her to Zenjirou, so they were definitely connected behind the scenes.

"Sir Zenjirou, do you remember your negotiations for magic tools? Prince Josep specifically asked Lady Lucretia to pass the permission to Princess Freya."

"Hmm? I think I remember that." Zenjirou didn't have a particularly good

memory, so he couldn't say for sure. However, Ines was certain of it.

"He did. Additionally, he gave Lucretia a signal with his eyes when he did so. She then asked Princess Freya to negotiate with the Broglie family first."

Zenjirou had no choice but to capitulate. "So Princess Freya negotiating at the Broglie estate is actually guidance from the Sharou family."

It went without saying that the goal was either to give Lucretia a win or improve her impression—to sell Lucretia to Freya, as the latter was already marrying into the royal family.

Ines had more to add. "Coincidentally, I spotted a group of unknown individuals moving a large object through an area of the palace. From my investigations this morning, they were heading for the Broglie estate."

There was a long pause.

"So there's a chance they're not just offering guidance, but also magic tools from the palace's vaults. Then letting the Broglie family pass it over in name at least."

Zenjirou sighed in exasperation, realizing the Sharou family was putting more effort into getting a concubine attached to him than he'd expected. Becoming royalty meant there was no escape from political expectations. Zenjirou had thought he understood that, but he had at least hoped for some peace before his wife gave birth.

Chapter 4 — An Unplanned Call Home

The next day, in accordance with his changed plans, Zenjirou returned temporarily to Capua.

“Welcome home, Sir Zenjirou,” a soldier greeted him calmly.

“My thanks. Where is Her Majesty?” he asked.

“Her Majesty is awaiting you in the inner palace,” the soldier answered briskly.

“I see. Thank you.”

It would appear that news of Zenjirou’s change of plans had indeed reached her. Either Francesco or Bona had relayed the message. In fact, there seemed to be more soldiers stationed in the room than normal.

“I will be heading there presently.”

“Of course, sir.”

Zenjirou’s statement and actions prompted the excess soldiers to escort him. The room was hot, but when he stepped out into the corridor, he immediately felt like he was baking in the sultry heat.

He’d been in the magic-cooled palace until mere moments ago, so the heat was all the more noticeable. Wanting to get out of it as quickly as possible, he hurried for the inner palace.

Once he arrived, he didn’t break stride, heading straight for his bedroom. The AC was running, making his room the one place in the country that could rival—and even surpass—the pleasantness of the Purple Egg Palace.

As the soldier had said, Zenjirou’s wife was waiting there for him. She was wearing a loose dress that wouldn’t restrict her stomach and sitting in a chair with armrests. She smiled at him from her seat.

“Welcome home, Zenjirou.”

“I’m glad to be back,” he answered.

He couldn’t help but smile upon hearing his name from his wife’s lips. If this had been an official return, they could have relaxed together as husband and wife. Unfortunately, it was an unscheduled journey.

What had required such a change of plans? Once Aura had received the explanation, she sighed with a meaningful look on her face.

“I see. People from two of the four dukes’ families wish to visit the country. Girls from the Elementacatto and Animeeum families.”

“Yup, Talajeh and Fiqriya, respectively. Talajeh wants a magic tool with an isolation barrier and Fiqriya wants to talk with Espiridion. Oh, she offered this as well. I think it’s her research notes. She wants him to see them.” As he explained that last part, Zenjirou placed the thick bundle of parchment on the table.

“Hmm. I believe it would be best handed directly from you to him. He is rather busy, however, so the girl’s wishes may not be granted.”

“I made sure both of them already knew that.”

The queen rested her chin in her hand at that and thought. “I see. As for Lady Talajeh’s goal of a magic tool... With my current condition, it would be you and Prince Francesco who will need to take the lead. If we come to an agreement, I will likely need to rely on you. I apologize, but I hope you can put the effort in if that comes to pass.”

Whatever else, Isabella’s presence would be putting a heavy burden on the Capuan treasury. The queen didn’t want to miss any possible opportunity to supplement it. Teleportation was one thing, but the isolation barrier was not a real concern.

Zenjirou indicated his agreement before suddenly thinking of something. “Oh yeah, Princess Isabella should already be here, right? Has she already seen you?”

He had been the one to provide travel via teleportation for the princess, her guards, and her attendants alike.

“Of course. She cast several stamina and vitality restoratives to be sure, but there are no issues at present.”

Healing magic for Aura was included in the original cost, so multiple spells were no problem. On the other hand, if anyone else—even Zenjirou—asked for healing while Isabella was here, it would naturally incur a separate charge.

Regardless, having someone, even only one person, capable of healing practically anything in the palace was surprisingly relieving from a psychological standpoint.

“That’s all I could ask for. My goals are pretty much all accomplished, then. So, just making sure, sending the two of them won’t be an issue, will it?”

“No, it is fine. However, we need to prepare rooms for them, so delay their arrival for as long as you can. The last day will be you and Ines, so the days just before that would be best.”

“Got it.” With the most urgent topics addressed, Zenjirou breathed a deep sigh. “Umm, was there anything else?” he asked himself. There was plenty of information he had to share, but his return was a sudden one, so he hadn’t gone over it all.

Aura spoke calmly to him as he glared up at the ceiling in thought. “I would like to hear about the magic tools first. Were you able to purchase a set for cooling? What of Princess Freya’s aims as well? Start there.”

“Ah, right. I didn’t have any issues with buying them; they were fine with selling. They wanted me to pay in marbles, but I paid in coin instead. I’ve already taken delivery of them but was asked not to bring them with me this time, so they’re still there.”

He paused and Aura could tell that what he next had to say wouldn’t be so welcome. Even so, she nodded wordlessly, urging him to continue.

“So, with Princess Freya, things were a lot more complicated. First off was the shock that Princess Margarita from the Sharou family was appointed her attendant. As far as ranks go, it looks like they’re treating her better than me. She managed to buy the water purification she most wanted, but the Twin Kingdoms made a point of *giving* her this amazing tool called the Lulled Sea. I’ve

only heard of it secondhand, but apparently it's incredible. Specifically, it..."

Zenjirou explained exactly what it did, and how and by whom it had come to be given to Freya. As Aura listened, a deep furrow appeared between her brows.

"So despite being landlocked, they want friendly relations with Uppasala that much. They even moved to include us. Speaking of such things, have you been acting towards King Bruno and Prince Josep as we discussed? How have they responded?"

Zenjirou thought back on the past few days and replied uncertainly. "Uh...I'm not sure anything's really changed. I've barely spoken with King Bruno, but Prince Josep's been very friendly, publicly."

"And you ensured the letter was delivered as we discussed as well?"

"Yup. I had the letter to King Bruno delivered, and I personally delivered the letter to Pope Benedict."

"So despite your clear reticence, their pleasant facade has not changed. They haven't spoken against you in either public or private. They don't seem to want to bargain, let alone find a compromise. Are they intending to simply accept our demands? What is panicking them?"

Zenjirou stayed silent to avoid derailing her train of thought. A while later, the queen turned to him for confirmation.

"Perhaps it was the jewels? What did Prince Francesco say about them?"

"Oh? You didn't hear?" He only asked because Francesco had been back in Capua for two days already. But the queen simply offered a slight shrug.

"I am both pregnant and busy. We have yet to sit and talk."

"I get it. That makes sense. He said none of them would work and that they were useless. The best one was apparently very close, though, and he's looking forward to future versions."

"Hmm, I see."

The queen fell into thought again. So, they couldn't yet say they had succeeded in creating the marbles for mass production. However, they were

apparently close enough that it was only a matter of time. She could therefore understand—to a degree—why the Sharou family hadn't changed their behavior even if it put them in a slightly worse position.

The topic of the marbles reminded Zenjirou of something else that was loosely related. "Oh, right, have you heard about that ridiculous thing Prince Francesco wants to make?"

"Ah, the magic tool of enchanting? I have. So, it would seem, have you. It is a calamity waiting to happen."

"It's just like him."

The couple sighed in unison. The prince's actions were impossible to read, and he acted like a thoughtless fool most of the time, just barely avoiding crossing the line. It all led to him having some level of control over everyone around him.

Regardless, this wasn't the time to lament that. Zenjirou explained how he and Francesco had directly opposing views of what that tool—something capable of making other magic tools—would mean.

"So Prince Francesco sees it as something that would be beneficial to the family," Zenjirou concluded. "His father and grandfather went so far as to ask if he was trying to destroy the family, though. It might have been an exaggerated way of saying it, but I take it you agree with them?"

The queen considered the question briefly before confirming. "Indeed. If I had to come down on one side or the other, I would agree with Prince Josep and King Bruno. Lineal magic is a country's greatest treasure. Enabling people outside of the royal family to use it is equivalent to throwing your own power away. It seems you think otherwise, though?" she asked, propping her cheek in a hand and looking expectantly at him.

At this point in their relationship, she had come to truly understand that Zenjirou was from another world. It wasn't a big deal in day-to-day life, but his way of thinking and sense of values were fundamentally different. It certainly caused problems, but it was equally true that those different perspectives could help.

Feeling the pressure of her expectations a bit, Zenjirou truthfully offered his thoughts. “Yeah. I think a magic tool that creates magic tools has the potential to see the Sharou family ruling the world.”

“Elucidate,” she said after a long pause.

That was far beyond what she was expecting, so her eyes had widened in shock. Still, she kept her voice calm. Zenjirou continued, slowly putting his thoughts in order as he spoke.

“Currently, every royal family has its own lineal magic and maintains that magic’s value by hiding and monopolizing it. Of course, that isn’t wrong, since lineal magic is definitely a pillar of support for the families. As far as enchanting is concerned, though, I think it could overturn people’s sense of values. Do you remember what you said when I asked why people here didn’t buy the magic tools for cooling if they were so convenient?”

“I do, of course?” she answered, a hint of questioning in her tone.

“You mentioned how expensive they are and that no one would spend that much money just to escape the heat of the blazing season. In the palaces in the Twin Kingdoms, though—both the Purple Egg Palace and the Ivory Cathedral—there is a steady supply of those tools, which makes the buildings pleasant to be in. The announcement alone would be enough—if the Sharou family said they were discontinuing such items to keep costs down, there’d be outrage.”

“Hmm. I could see that happening in the Twin Kingdoms, yes.” The queen still wasn’t sure where the conversation was going, but she nodded along.

“In other words, Capuans see them as nice to have, but not something they ever *could* have, but the people spending time in the palaces there see them as something they *do* have and that they could not do without. I think most people in this world, not just Capua, see magic tools in general as ultra-luxury items they could never own. Obviously, that means they can do without it, right? But Prince Francesco’s magic tool could turn that on its head. It would make mass production, and mass sales, of magic tools possible. That’ll change how people see the world. People will start feeling the same as those in the Twin Kingdoms’ palaces. Magic tools will become a necessity they can’t live without.”

For once, Aura was overwhelmed by her husband’s explanation and was

unable to really understand it. He realized that and did his best to clarify his thoughts.

“If a magic tool that creates magic tools comes into the world, the prices of individual magic tools will fall. Right now, they’re more expensive than jewels or military dash drakes, but if they can be mass-produced, things like cooling tools will become more like a particularly expensive bit of furniture, like a chest of drawers or a desk. At that point, it won’t just be nobility...commoners will be able to afford them too. Gathering money from a million customers a coin at a time is more profitable than obtaining more money at once from a hundred.”

“Wait, Zenjiro. This is all just speculation. Even if they can mass-produce the tools, that won’t necessarily reduce the expenses to produce them, and people who live without magic tools won’t necessarily spare the still-considerable expenses even if they are cheaper. What of the possibility of theft? The Sharou family would be wringing their own necks.”

It would mean that something only a certain subset of people had been capable of would become possible for all if they had the tool. Of course, even people could be kidnapped, but there was a distinct difference in difficulty between kidnapping someone and stealing a tool. Further, someone who was kidnapped could resist by escaping or killing themselves. Those risks didn’t exist with a tool. Once it was stolen, it was all over.

Aura’s objection was entirely logical, but Zenjiro utterly rejected it with a shocking statement. “Then they can just sell them from the start. It would have to be at an even greater price than a normal magic tool, though.”

“Would that not be surrendering their own interests?” she asked, unable to hide her shock.

He chewed over his response with a conflicted look. “That’s true, but... Man, how do I explain this? Actually doing that would change its value in the first place. It’s hard to explain, so I’ll just skip over all the intermediary stuff and explain what will happen if things progress like I’m thinking. The Sharou family manages to mass-produce magic tools that create other magic tools. They then get sold all over the world and every country can start creating its own magic tools. Once that happens, the world won’t be able to continue without them.

Weapons would be the best example. There are a lot of them like the spear of fire or the shield of wind, right? Imagine magic tools that create those being spread throughout the world. Every country will be able to make those magical weapons. Can you see a country managing to survive if they *didn't* take that up?"

Aura carefully considered his question before shaking her head. "There are a lot of variables in war, so I cannot say it would be *impossible*, but it would certainly be exceedingly difficult."

Her response gave him some more confidence, so he continued. "That would make countries without the magic tools to make such weapons inferior to those who can. There are many neighboring countries on poor terms on the Southern Continent. Would any of them be able to withstand a situation where a rival country has such a tool and they do not?"

"I see..."

Military matters were the easiest for Aura to relate to, and she could finally understand at least part of what Zenjirou was getting at.

If two countries fought, one with magic weapons and one without, the one without would be unable to resist. A magic tool that allowed them to *create* those weapons would let them build a stock. However, all magic tools had a finite lifespan and usage limit. Eventually, even the magic tool that created the weapons would break.

What would happen if the Twin Kingdoms then said they would sell to one of those countries but not the other? It required no real thought. The country that could not restock would fall. With that understood, neither country could afford to displease the Twin Kingdoms. It would create an irrevocable hierarchy between them.

"I understand what you wish to say. I can think of several impediments to that sequence of events, but it would certainly make the Twin Kingdoms rulers in effect."

"Yeah, well, that's what I mean," he said vaguely as Aura grew wary.

She actually understood a single part of his thoughts on the matter. It was less

her lacking the capability to understand and more Zenjirou lacking the capability to explain. The true threat wasn't clear because he had used the example of military might—something everyone could understand—to simplify things.

But really, he conceptualized magic tools as the machines supporting modern society, including such things as appliances and cars. In that respect, the weapons would be akin to guns, tanks, and planes. The magic tools that made other magic tools would be like machine tools. Factories would spring up across the world, creating cars, air conditioners, fridges, and even computers.

However, the machines in those factories could only be created by a single country. Would any other country be able to oppose such a nation? If relations broke down, the foundations of people's lives would vanish from beneath them. Zenjirou could only imagine that because of his own life where such luxuries were "only natural" to have access to.

For someone like Aura, who had only lived in this world, his descriptions were insufficient. He let his gaze shift around awkwardly.

"Honestly, Prince Francesco developing it isn't really that big of an issue. On its own, the time needed to increase the number of magic tools created won't change much."

Magic tools that created magic tools would not in and of themselves increase the number of magic tools forged. Aura could immediately understand the implication.

"The problem is when it is combined with your offering and the mass production of marbles from our craftsmen."

"Right."

The production of truly round, transparent marbles, something that would allow for a vast reduction in manufacturing time for magic items and the very thing Capua was on the verge of accomplishing. If both things were brought together, the mass production of magic tools in general would be possible.

Roughly half of Zenjirou's concerns with the situation were of his own making, which was exactly why he was bringing it up.

“That’s why I think we’re in trouble. Maybe we should cooperate with him. Regardless of our success with the marbles, I don’t think we should just sell them all off to the Twin Kingdoms.”

Aura’s response to that was slightly unexpected. “Indeed. I understand your concerns. However, it is not something we can decide here and now. I may be reading too much into things, but I think I can smell smoke.”

“Smoke?” Zenjirou asked.

“Yes,” she replied with a nod. “Both king and prince have reacted far too mildly to your behavior. They were also far too generous with Princess Freya. I feel like they are hiding some form of panic behind their actions. It seems like they want to make both us and Uppasala allies in something. Again, I may be overthinking it but perhaps King Bruno has noticed the seeds of some form of chaos that I have not.”

“The seeds of chaos...” Zenjirou parroted. He grew all the more concerned at that. He had lived all his life in a world far removed from chaos and conflict. He could not call Aura’s senses in this area into question after she had lived through a war.

Her expression twisted apologetically as she continued. “You may need to reconcile with King Bruno and Prince Josep, depending on what happens. I’m sorry, but ready yourself for that.”

He scowled but wasn’t foolish enough to put his personal feelings before the country’s politics. “Got it. I’ll be ready.”

“I apologize,” she said, even as she thought of how she would be steering her country. “Regardless, our final decisions will be dependent on their behavior. King Bruno and Pope Benedict should both offer replies as you leave the country for the last time, so we will decide based on those.”

“Got it,” he replied, agreeing with the queen’s decision.



Zenjirou’s sudden return was to last for two days, so he was only spending a single night in the country. The next morning, therefore, saw him in the bedroom, getting ready for the trip. He would be teleporting from there to the

Twin Kingdoms.

The only place he could visualize strongly enough to teleport without aid was the designated room in Capua's palace. Since he was unable to form a strong enough image of his current destination without help, he had the camera turned on to display an image of the room in the Twin Kingdoms.

While Zenjirou was setting that up, Aura rose from her seat with the maids' assistance.

"I know that this may be getting a touch trite now, but please take care," she said.

"I will. Thanks, Aura," he replied, lifting his gaze from the camera to his wife with a smile.

She handed two letters to him. "I thought things over last night, and I believe we should change our plans. Give these to King Bruno and Eladio."

Eladio was the name of the Drake Marksmen Knights' third battalion commander—the man in charge of Zenjirou's protection while he was in the Twin Kingdoms. The letter to the king was properly sealed with wax, while the one addressed to Eladio was simply folded over.

"You sure you don't want to seal it?" he asked. "It's not going to cause issues if I see it, is it?"

The queen offered a nod in response. "Indeed. I would prefer it if you did, in fact. It concerns you as well, after all. It posts Eladio and his men in the country for the long term. The letter to King Bruno is to ask for permission to do so."

Zenjirou considered that for a while and was only able to come up with a single reason. His face twisted at his thoughts. He then opened up the letter and cast his eyes across it. His current level of literacy in the language meant he could only understand about half of it but it seemed to say exactly what Aura had told him.

"And that long-term post is to protect me?"

"Indeed," she replied bluntly.

Zenjirou let out a deep sigh. "Seriously?"

Him needing a guard in the Twin Kingdoms meant he would be staying there for longer than expected. That, in turn, meant that his business in the other nation would not be complete after this next visit.

Aura gave a slightly guilty smile at his disappointed slump. “I apologize, but we need closer communication between our nations. The quickest, most definitive method to do so is teleportation. You and I are the only ones currently capable of that, at least for the next decade or so.”

“Yeah. Zenkichi’s old man needs to step up to the plate until he’s old enough.”

Aura gave no response. After all, Carlos Zenkichi was first in line to the throne of Capua. Even when he grew up, he’d not have such a free position as Zenjirou.

The child currently growing inside her was a different matter, but the older prince reaching maturity would do nothing for Zenjirou’s busy schedule. The one saving grace was that teleportation meant he could make frequent trips back to the inner palace where his wife was waiting.

This wasn’t the time to be considering that, though. She would leave that problem to her future self and set her mind to bidding her husband farewell.

“I should get going, then,” he said. “I need to focus, so step back a bit?”

“Very well,” she replied, moving back with the maids at her side. Zenjirou then focused on his teleportation. He fixed his gaze on the camera’s screen to burn the image into his mind before closing his eyes to imagine himself standing in the middle of the image.

He put all of his concentration into maintaining that image while practically unconsciously manipulating his mana output and chanting the spell.

“Send all things in the space that I envision to the place that I desire. As compensation, I offer—”

A moment later, he vanished from in front of Aura. He had managed it in a single attempt this time. The many opportunities he’d had to try it had led to his proficiency improving by leaps and bounds.

After seeing him off, Aura eased back into her chair with assistance from the

maids. Once she was seated, she let out a deep sigh.

“They assigned Princess Margarita to Princess Freya. Additionally, they sold her a purifier and even gifted the Lulled Sea as a ‘symbol of friendship between their countries.’ There has to be something behind it. We see the Northern Continent as a necessity as well, after all.”

Freya would soon be boarding the *Glasisr’s Leaf* and returning to the Northern Continent. Aura wanted to have people she trusted on board to gather information there.

“Margarette, you are a given, considering your appearance.”

“Understood,” replied the woman in question from behind. She bowed her blonde head in agreement as she stepped forward to talk.

“I regret that sending you to the Northern Continent may be somewhat harsh, but we have no one else capable of blending in. I offer my apologies and hope you will do so.”

“Thank you for your concern. However, I only have vague memories from my youth. Capua is my home, and my loyalty is to you.”

“Very well. Know that I do not take that loyalty lightly,” Aura replied.

The maid gave another bow before moving back to her original position. Aura kept her in the corner of her eye while her thoughts swirled.

“Zenjirou would be the best option, I suppose. Part of the reason for the trip is to gain permission for Princess Freya to become his concubine. It makes perfect sense for him to accompany her on such a journey. Above all else, if he goes to the Northern Continent even once, he will be able to come and go via teleportation. That cannot go unconsidered.”

Zenjirou was irreplaceable, so she was hesitant to expose him to danger. However, the increased utility that it would represent was too much to pass up. Teleportation was just that much of a game-changer.

“The magic tools should make it far less dangerous. I can ensure Prince Francesco creates a single-use magic tool for teleportation in case the worst should come to pass. That should minimize the risk.”

As a politician, she could not disregard the benefits of sending Zenjirou to the Northern Continent. Her thoughts developed further. The Twin Kingdoms was showing an unusual amount of accommodation to Freya, who came from that continent.

And it wasn't just to Freya either. Despite the clear reticence Zenjirou had demonstrated, they had practically bent over backward for him. The Twin Kingdoms having an ulterior motive and trying to get them involved in something would not be a concern.

The concern came with the possibility that they were simply in a position where they could not afford to do anything else—if they had noticed something which meant they *needed* friendly relations with both Capua and Uppasala.

“If that comes to pass, I doubt we could refuse any such treaties or alliances.”

Perhaps they wanted an even closer alliance or pact. There were several ways of going about that, but she could hypothesize the most likely steps they would take.

“They will probably offer a high-ranking noble—or maybe even a royal—as a concubine for Zenjirou as a symbol of their friendship,” she mused aloud.

More specifically, it would be Lucretia or Bona, with a lesser probability of one of the girls from the four dukedoms. If the Twin Kingdoms saw an alliance as indispensable, it would become immensely difficult to refuse them. While marriages between different countries were rare due to lineal magic being equivalent to royal status, Zenjirou *already* carried the blood of both the Capua and Sharou families, making him an exception.

“Truly, though, it feels like every solution is being pushed onto my husband as of late...”

She then let out another deep sigh, as if to expel her feelings of guilt at the same time.





Meanwhile, having safely arrived in the Twin Kingdoms, Zenjirou had returned to his rooms and set about completing his duties as quickly as possible.

Before anything else, he had called Eladio up to hand over the letter from Aura.

“Eladio,” he said, “Her Majesty has issued a change in your order. The particulars can be found here.” He handed the letter to the taller man as he spoke.

“I shall review them immediately,” the knight replied, doing so. His eyebrow quirked as he finished. “A long-term posting here? In other words, we are not to return with the relief force from the Twin Kingdoms?”

Zenjirou nodded. “Indeed. We will be forming closer ties with the Twin Kingdoms, so you and your men will be posted here for a while. However, that will not apply to those who cannot adapt to living abroad. Anyone who finds the burden too onerous will be allowed to return with the relief force.”

“Understood. To confirm, how long will any others be remaining in the country?” he asked, thinking of his subordinates.

“The Twin Kingdoms are replacing their forces in Capua periodically. They seem to intend to do so once every two to three years. We will be doing the same and rotating with them. In other words, they will return after two to three years.”

The knight’s expression relaxed slightly at his answer.

“Very well. I will inform the men of that. From my perspective, there are three who would be best served by returning. However, I would suggest a visible punishment for them when they return.”

Zenjirou wasn’t entirely happy with the suggestion. “I would say that not being suited to a foreign post would be beyond an individual’s control, would it not?”

The young commander did not falter at the question from his superior. “Indeed. However, they are still insufficient in some way. No matter what else,

there is the risk that we could invite a spate of people feigning that inability if there were no form of punishment.”

“I see.” Zenjirou had no choice but to defer to the commander here.

At least some people would certainly go so far as to lie in order to get home if it would be two to three years otherwise. Punishing those who dropped those duties—even if it was due to unavoidable poor health—would serve as a deterrent.

Emotionally, Zenjirou didn’t want to agree. However, he wasn’t arrogant enough to refute his subordinate’s valid suggestions with no alternative plan of his own.

“Very well. I will discuss this with Her Majesty when I return to make those arrangements.”

“Thank you for taking my suggestion into consideration, sir,” the knight said. He came to attention so rapidly, you could almost hear his spine straightening.

Once the man had left, Zenjirou sank back into his chair and considered things. “What to do now, then?” he mused quietly to himself.

He was currently holding the letter from Aura to Bruno in his hand. Its contents were much the same as he had already informed Eladio of. Changing plans and having a guard force stationed long-term would require permission for them to remain in the country. The Twin Kingdoms was doing much the same for Francesco’s and Bona’s guards, so permission was practically assured. The problem Zenjirou had was how to deliver the letter.

His emotions agreed with doing the same as last time and getting Lucretia to deal with it. However, Aura had told him to consider reconciling with the two men. She had spoken in vague terms, but Zenjirou could hear what went unsaid—it was extremely likely that he would *have* to do so before long.

He doubted she would give such warnings if the possibility was small.

“Then again, this is relatively urgent, so sending it via Lucretia shouldn’t be a problem, right?”

The letter requested that plans that had been made for Zenjirou’s guards to

depart imminently be scrapped. It required several days of notice, so not being able to directly discuss it with the king or crown prince was unavoidable.

“Yup, I’ll ask her to do it.”

His conclusion wasn’t wrong by any means, but he couldn’t claim to have not included his emotions in making the decision.

Chapter 5 — Reconciliation and Return

His life in the Twin Kingdoms changed very little after that. Each day, he'd send a single person to Capua, and other than that, he was relatively free.

Once he had sent Freya, Skaji, the three maids, Natalio, and Talajeh's nominees, the calendar marked the transition from the blazing season to the active season. At that point, teleportation was no longer the sole method of long-distance travel.

That morning, Lucretia had been accompanied on her usual visit by Margarita. The former was the first to speak.

"Your Majesty, I have served as an attendant for you until today but regret to inform you that I will need to withdraw from this position due to personal reasons. I beg your forgiveness. The duties will now be carried out by Princess Margarita here."

That prompted the princess in question to continue. "I am Margarita Sharou, of the same family. Though the time I spend as your attendant may be short, I shall carry out the role to the best of my ability. If there is anything you require, please inform me."

For whatever reason, Lucretia was no longer going to be his attendant. Zenjirou understood the reason and was not particularly surprised. He simply gave his thanks.

"You need not apologize. You have been a great boon for the time you have spent in the role. After all, you have been entrusted with acting as the Broglie family's representative to transport a magic tool over land to our own lands, I hear. It is a significant duty, and you should be allowed to fulfill it."

Lucretia lifted her head quickly enough to send her blonde hair bouncing.

"Thank you, Your Majesty. I hope to see you again in Capua."

Zenjirou couldn't suppress a somewhat rueful smile at her sparkling expression. "Indeed. I can make no promises, but I would be happy to talk for a

while as thanks for your aid here—should our schedules align.”

It could hardly be called a *friendly* response, but it was much closer to one than his behavior thus far had been, so Lucretia’s face broke into a smile.

“Thank you.”

His softening could have been due to finding out the reason for her desperation, or else knowing that there was a likelihood he’d need to reconcile with the upper echelons of the country. Whatever the case, Lucretia noticed but didn’t have the time to capitalize on it just then.

“I shall have to excuse myself,” she said instead. “I look forward to meeting again.”

“Indeed. Good health to you,” Zenjirou replied.

She reluctantly left. Once she had done so, he turned to the princess in the room.

“Our time together may be short, but I look forward to working with you, Princess Margarita. I have heard of how you aided Princess Freya as well.”

“It is an honor to hear it, Your Majesty,” she replied with a carefree smile. “As you can see, I may not be the most fashionable of women but I will do my utmost to assist you.”

Indeed, while she was clad in the colors of the Sharou family, the dress was relatively plain. It was a bare minimum of compromise due to being out in public. It rather reminded Zenjirou of the princess’s apprentice, Bona.

“I must admit that I feel somewhat guilty about taking up a famed enchanter’s time.”

She shrugged in response. “Do not be concerned. My agreement with my uncle means I am already spending all of my mana on magic tools for water purification. I would be unable to create anything else regardless.”

Apparently, said creation was something she could do figuratively one-handed in her off time. However, with it requiring most of her mana, she would be unable to progress with her research any further.

That more or less followed, but she could still continue her craft in smithing.

That would not require mana, so she was likely just waving off his concern.

“I see. Then I will be relying on you for the next three days.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.”

Zenjirou’s quota had entirely fixed itself at sending one person each day. Today, he would be sending Talajeh of the Elementacatto family.

When he had sent her porter the day before—a man practically as broad as he was tall—the fellow had been carrying luggage large enough to easily be mistaken as a dresser. However, Talajeh was also carrying a ridiculously large burden on her back.

“Talajeh, what are you taking with you?” he asked.

In answer, she threw out her bountiful chest and smiled sweetly. “The tools of the trade.”

“And what was your man carrying before?”

“Stock and money,” she answered easily.

“I see...”

It seemed there was no exaggeration to her claims of going to Capua for business; it was one hundred percent the truth.

“I suppose being able to both buy and sell is the hallmark of a good businessperson. I hope you find yourself well acquitted.”

“My thanks,” Talajeh replied with a bow.

Zenjirou had nothing more to discuss with her. “I will be sending you now. Are you ready?”

“I am, whenever you wish.” She closed her eyes as she spoke. She had a fairly full figure and her dress’s neckline was rather low, so Zenjirou wasn’t entirely sure where to put his hand.

Stay with it, he told himself, doing his best to act natural as he put his right hand on her shoulder and spoke the incantation.

His recent practice meant that as long as the stone room in Capua’s palace

was the destination, he had been able to cast the spell in a single attempt on most occasions, even without using the camera.

“Send all things in the space that I envision to the place that I desire. As compensation, I offer—”

However, it took three attempts to send Talajeh.

Once he had managed to fulfill his quota for the day, Zenjirou returned to his room. He felt somehow uncomfortable where he was.

“It makes sense, but I’m getting lonelier and lonelier here.”

The only familiar face in the vicinity from his seat on the sofa was Ines. The various people who had spent time in this country with him—even the three maids from the inner palace and Natalio—had already been dispatched back to Capua. Even Francesco, who had constantly pushed his presence onto Zenjirou, and Zenjirou’s all but concubine Freya (and her guard, Skaji) were now back in Capua.

The soldiers headed by Eladio were still here, barring Natalio, so the actual number of people around him was much the same. However, the number of people aware of his disposition had plummeted, making him much more uncomfortable.

He shifted pointlessly in his seat until his second attendant, Margarita, arrived.

“It is almost time, Your Majesty. Are you ready?”

Her question reminded him of the duties he would rather forget. He had a lunch scheduled with King Bruno and Prince Josep. There were the final pleasantries that needed exchanging before he fully left, but Zenjirou would rather have fulfilled that during the banquet that would be held on his penultimate day here.

Of course, even his position didn’t allow him to refuse an invitation from the king and the crown prince with impunity.

“I am. If you could lead the way?” he asked, suppressing the sigh as he slowly stood from his seat.

The lunch was held in a rather small room meant for royalty. Bruno sat at the head of the long table with Josep to his right. Opposite the prince was Zenjirou. He was the third and final person seated at the table.

The servers and various guards were all back along the wall, but such people fundamentally didn't count in terms of attendance. This was a three-person lunch.

Zenjirou ate somewhat mechanically, following the manners required for the situation as he ferried the soup from a silver bowl to his mouth. He couldn't really taste it. Considering the sweat that had sprung up on his brow despite the cooling magic tools, it was likely a spicy soup. But following his relatively hasty grounding in etiquette was the most he could do—he couldn't spare the mental effort to savor the dishes.

Whether they realized that or not, the king and prince waited until the fruits for dessert were finished and all three of them had used the finger bowls to wash their hands before speaking.

"To think that you will be returning home the day after tomorrow. It feels simultaneously like a lifetime and mere days," the king said.

"You have been a great deal of help," Zenjirou said. His face was hard, and it was almost like he was reading out the set phrases required. "Thanks to your assistance, I have managed to accomplish my goals here, and I cannot thank you enough."

The wily old king showed no hint of a flinch at his attitude, simply smiling. "Truly, you need not thank me. I simply hope we can continue our friendly relationship into the future."

Zenjirou pulled the corners of his lips up into a smile as he answered. "It would be an honor. I could ask for no more than a long and fruitful relationship between our nations," he replied, purposefully shifting the focus of the response.

"True. I suppose friendly relations with my son would be more worthwhile to our countries than with me, considering my retirement."

"Indeed. Prince Largo has been an incredible help."

Zenjirou purposefully dragging the conversation from any friendliness between those currently present to one between the families as a whole and bringing up Largo—who wasn't even present—was stopping the conversation from progressing. Perhaps finally losing patience with his stubbornness, the prince spoke up rather than his father.

“Now that I think of it, Your Majesty, I recall that your protection detail is to remain in our lands. Can we assume that you intend to visit us again via teleportation?”

Zenjirou remained silent for a moment. He would have preferred to deny them, but his discussion with Aura regarding her future goals meant that lying here would cause a larger issue down the line.

“Indeed,” he said eventually. “I am unsure of any definite timeline, but I believe that will be the case.”

The king and prince alike both gave purposeful smiles at that.

“That is good to hear.”

“Indeed. Perhaps the best news all year.”

Of course, neither of them was lying about their happiness with that outcome. Having one of very few people who could use teleportation in their lands was a shockingly helpful boon. That was particularly true now, when they had many people going to and from Capua. In addition, Zenjirou's presence meant that there would be more chances to persuade him.

“Father, what would you say to maintaining the annex His Majesty is currently using for his next visit?”

“Hm, a good idea. That will allow us to welcome His Majesty whenever he wishes.”

Zenjirou recoiled and searched for a way out of the father and son forcing part of the royal palace on him. “I am honored to hear it, but that is not a decision I can make alone. If you truly wish to do this then please do so via Her Majesty in Capua.”

Accepting space within another country's palace without consulting Aura

would lead to a multitude of rumors and “his” territory moving from the Capuan palace to the Twin Kingdoms. He was genuinely somewhat admiring of the father and son’s zeal in pursuing any opening he left.

“Practically, however, you will likely visit our lands once more. Going through the process each time will be more work.”

“In that case, father, what about a two-year lease rather than a full transferral? We could add an auto-renewal unless His Majesty specifically requests that it cease.”

“Ah, a good suggestion.”

The pair were treating part of their palace like a phone contract. A two-year auto-renewing lease rather than an indefinite loan would limit how it could be canceled. It was possible that the only way to do so would be when the contract came up for renewal. This was somewhat bothersome but Aura would almost certainly be sending him to the Twin Kingdoms again. It was effectively necessary to secure a place for him to stay within the country. This was something he could not just refuse.

“If I may,” Bruno continued, “I would suggest payment be in the form of a set number of teleportation requests for our benefit.”

“I agree, father. Francesco and Bona are not the only citizens in Capua at present. Talajeh and Fiqriya of the Elementacatto and Animeeum families are also there. Lucretia of the Broglie family should be joining them in a month as well. A rapid, safe path between our two nations should it be required would be immensely valuable.”

Calling them back could be done by asking Aura to send them, but if they wanted to return again, Aura would be unable to do so given her ties to the throne. Zenjirou would need to come and send them instead.

Frankly, it was a rather irritating agreement, but a valid one to tighten ties between the two countries. At the very least, it wasn’t something he could reject here and now.

“I hear and understand your suggestions. I will convey them to Her Majesty once I return to Capua.”

He stuck to being unable to agree to international engagements on his own. With his answer essentially cementing his stubbornness, the father and son exchanged glances before seeming to shrug in surrender.

“If you will excuse me, then. Thank you for your hospitality today.”

“Not at all; I only wish it could have been a better spread,” the king replied.

“We would happily welcome you to such a meal again, Your Majesty.”

Once the smiles and farewells were all exchanged, Zenjirou left the room. As soon as the door thudded closed, Josep let out a sigh containing all the disappointment he had felt over the last five hours.

“I expected some difficulties, but His Majesty was far more intractable than I had predicted.”

The king nodded in agreement. “Indeed. In all my years, I have never come across someone as hard to reconcile with. No matter how hard I look, there seems to be nothing to pique his interest. Not money, status, fame, influence, or women. Placating someone who wants for nothing is all but impossible. His Majesty is satisfied with the current state of things and we are impinging on that state. It is inevitable he would shy away from that. There seems to be nothing we have that can better the situation either.” The king raised his hands in surrender.

Josep shrugged slightly at his father’s response. “We will have to keep on pushing. At least from what Largo has said, the direct cause of His Majesty’s animosity was us attempting to use Prince Carlos. Apparently, his expression was quite the sight. Therefore, I believe that we should divert slightly and tackle the situation through Prince Carlos as well.”

The king simply lifted an eyebrow at the somewhat disquieting statement. “By involving him again? All I can see that accomplishing is turning His Majesty into an enemy in truth.”

Josep shook his head at the concern. “Quite the opposite. If Largo’s reports are to be believed, His Majesty dotes on Prince Carlos despite him only being an infant. In that case, we should provide something *for the prince*, not His Majesty himself, in order to win his favor.”

The king considered his son's proposal. "That certainly sounds effective. However, the prince is not even two years old yet, is he? A gift for a nursing infant is rather difficult. Perhaps we should turn our attention to Queen Aura? While His Majesty does adore his son, he has similar feelings for his wife as well."

The middle-aged prince considered the rebuttal in turn before shaking his head. "I am not too sure about that. How can I put it? His Majesty is exceptionally protective and fond of his son but seems to respect Her Majesty as a superior as well. I doubt it would be as effective at the very least."

It wasn't about the difference in the amount of love he held for either of them, but rather the *type*. Carlos Zenkichi was simply Zenjirou's child to him. Aura, on the other hand, was his wife but also an independent woman in her own right. Therefore, if someone gave the prince an incredible gift, Zenjirou would give his thanks in his son's stead.

On the other hand, he respected Aura as a person. While he would express pleasure for a gift, he would consider the actual thanks to be from Aura personally. Of course, he would be more pleasantly disposed to someone giving his wife gifts of that ilk, but not as directly as he would with his son.

"True. That makes sense." The king nodded with a deep furrow in his brow.

Zenjirou was a man who could marry a queen and simultaneously see her as a superior and beloved wife. From the perspective of the Southern Continent's ruling classes, it was an extremely warped perspective. Josep's understanding—albeit an imperfect facsimile—of Zenjirou's emotional state was proof of his flexible way of thinking and keen insight.

"So we act ideally for His Majesty, and failing that, for Prince Carlos, to build up whatever rapport we can."

"Indeed, father. However, we should still continue our negotiations with Queen Aura. A discussion of costs and benefits works with her, so they will progress much more smoothly. She will be the center of any international cooperation as well."

"True. Valuable though His Majesty is, we cannot focus entirely on him."

Aura could not move away from the throne, so closer ties with Capua required Zenjirou's cooperation. Additionally, Aura had said that, as a rule, she would agree with her husband's words and actions. Therefore, harming relations with him was a fatal mistake.

However, the fact remained that the most powerful person in Capua was Aura, not Zenjirou. No matter how good a relationship they built with Zenjirou, if Aura didn't agree, they would gain no help from Capua.

The king stared off into the distance as he murmured, "It was a true windfall that Princess Freya decided to visit our country. Without the information from her, we might not have made it in time."

She had been in the country for a dozen or so days. During that time, multiple people had talked with her across the various dinners, balls, and negotiations. The culmination of those conversations and analyzing the information therein allowed an insight into the rough state of the Northern Continent.

"The Northern Continent has progressed technologically by leaps and bounds over only a few decades. If four-masted ships such as the *Glafir's Leaf* become commonplace, politicians, tradesmen and the church will no longer be unconcerned with the world of the Southern Continent. If we don't advance to the same level, we will be nothing more than ripened crops for the Northern Continent's scythes."

They needed to develop to the same level as the Northern Continent. They could not do so by imitation, however. After all, their cultures had diverged wildly. The Northern Continent didn't place anywhere near the same level of importance on magic as the Southern Continent did. Especially with their recent advancements in technology, more and more people saw magic as a destabilizing influence that increased individual power.

In contrast, the Southern Continent still placed a great deal of importance on magic. Only those with lineal magic could reign as royalty. Even a commoner with superlative magic skill could gain just as high a position—if not higher—as nobility.

If the Southern Continent tried to emulate the advancements of the Northern Continent despite that disparity—attempting to focus on technology over magic

—there was little chance it would go well.

It would take time to change people's feelings and values in that way. In that interim, the Northern Continent would continue developing.

They were starting from a worse position, and running after them with that extra weight wouldn't let them catch up. Therefore, it made sense to focus on developing their magic.

Fortunately, the Sharou family's lineal magic was enchantment. There was nothing better suited to a magic renaissance. Magic's downfall was in the number of casters available. There were exceedingly few truly skilled mages. So when considered in terms of national power, there was too much of a gap between the different countries, which would never stabilize.

Take the archmage Espiridion of Capua, for example. If he wished, he could create a campground for an entire army in a single day, even providing water if there was no source for it. However, there were no mages on a similar level among the Capuan youth. In other words, the tactics that relied on his existence could not be passed down to the next generation.

This was far from a welcome thing for an army, which might need to make a show of power at any time. However, if those characteristic problems were turned into magic tools via enchantment, things became much more stable.

If an individual mage's strength was needed for a hundred consecutive days, the mage would have to remain in place for that entire period. But with a magic tool, the burden could be shared and rotated between several people. Magic tools coupled the ability of magic to wield immense power with the offer of the added practical benefit of enabling anyone to use them.

Bruno's mouth twisted as he spat his next words. "We therefore *must* push through periodic purchases of those jewels once they enter production."

"Indeed. We need more magic tools to stand against the technological advancements of the Northern Continent. Our current production levels are not enough," Josep agreed firmly.

"In the worst case, we may need to acknowledge a 'Twin Kingdom' to match our own 'Twin Kingdoms.' Assuming we are repaid with either space-time magic

or the method for mass-producing those jewels, of course.”

Space-time magic and jewel—or marble—production.

“Either way, His Majesty will be the key.”

“Indeed. Whatever else, I want him as part of our plans.”

“We have provided both Bona and Lucretia with Dual Burn Parchment this time rather than just Francesco. I want to keep as close an eye as we can on the Capuan royal family. We can wait for any additional information from them for now.”

The king was nodding along with his son’s words before he suddenly stopped in realization. “We will need to be upfront with Her Majesty. Josep, I will be handing you the throne within a year. Once domestic matters have calmed down, I may visit Capua with His Majesty’s aid. The situation may lead to that changing, but be prepared for it.”

Josep’s face showed shock for a moment, but it was the most rational response, he realized. Once he took the throne, Bruno would be the *former* king. Nothing other than another royal in title. With Aura unable to leave the throne in Capua, someone from the Twin Kingdoms would need to go to her if they wanted to speak to her directly.

The issue was that, official positions aside, Bruno had served as king for over fifty years and was one of the most influential people on the continent. His visit would cause tremors across the entirety of Randlion. If they were careless, they could see baseless rumors of Capua and the Twin Kingdoms joining forces to rule over the continent as a whole.

Regardless, they still needed to establish some type of collaborative relationship with Capua as soon as possible given the current state of the Northern Continent.

“Very well. I shall await that.”

The son trusted Bruno both as his father and as his king, so his only response was a nod and agreement.



The last two days passed in the blink of an eye. Zenjirou had sent the final person—Fiquiya of the Animeeum family—safely to Capua that morning and it was now his last night in the country.

Tonight's banquet was doubling as a send-off party for Zenjirou, so it was a lavish event. It was being held in the banquet hall of the Purple Egg Palace, but there weren't only purple-clad members of the Sharou family—there were also several white-clad Gilbelles.

Freya had already left along with Lucretia, so his partner was his current attendant: Princess Margarita. She was already married and hadn't shown any real interest in Zenjirou. Actually, it was more pleasant than sharing the evening with Lucretia, or even Freya, in fact.

He faltered slightly when Margarita introduced him to her husband, but the man was a jolly, pleasant fellow, so the conversation actually flowed freely. As for other attendees that left an impression on him, Prince Vittore would be the first to come to mind. He was the spitting image of his father but rather different in appearance than his older brother, Francesco. He acquitted himself well for being only seven, giving a proper greeting and a short amount of conversation. Zenjirou saw him as an intelligent young man.

Zenjirou's explanation of the *Glasis's Leaf* had made the boy's eyes sparkle as he declared he wanted to go sailing for adventure in the future. It was rather adorable and more appropriate for his age.

His wet nurse—now nanny—had scolded him for that, however, and he had calmed down immediately, showing how well he'd been brought up.

Finally, Bruno and Benedict—both of whom often used their busyness as a reason to avoid these meetings—had appeared, and Zenjirou had exchanged official farewells with them to round the night out.

It was now the next morning and he had prepared everything before heading to the teleportation room with Ines under the protection of Eladio and his men. The only people from the Twin Kingdoms who were accompanying him were Margarita—having taken on the role from Lucretia—and her own attendants.

He would be sending Ines first and then himself. That would finally mark the end of his stay in the country.

The active season had now begun. Thinking about it, Zenjirou realized he had traveled to the Twin Kingdoms once the blazing season had started and spent more than half of the three months making up the season in the Twin Kingdoms this year.

“I will be waiting for you in Capua, Sir Zenjirou,” Ines said, shouldering her luggage and holding the cooling magic tools in her hands.

Zenjirou was carrying the now much lighter rucksack that had held the payment for the tools and two letters in his pocket. They were the replies from Bruno and Benedict for the letters Aura had initially sent.

“I will be following right away. Are you ready?” he asked.

“I am,” she replied in her usual calm tone. Zenjirou put his hand on her and then began to recite the familiar incantation.

“Here we go, then. *Send all things in the space that I envision to the place that I desire. As compensation, I offer—*”

All his practice meant that the spell had exactly the effect he wanted. With Ines having vanished from in front of him, Zenjirou felt the strongest sense of loss he had felt since arriving in the country. He felt even less at ease than when he had sent the three young maids and less safe than when he had sent Natalio. In some respects, Ines had been with him even more than Aura was when he was within the inner palace.

It was time for him to head back as well. With that thought in mind, Zenjirou turned to offer his farewells to Margarita.

“Well then, Princess Margarita, this is goodbye. The Twin Kingdoms as a whole—including both the Sharou and Gilbelle families—have been of great help to me. You have my thanks.”

The princess gave an easy smile in response. “It is an honor to hear it, Your Majesty. The annex will be kept as it is, so you may feel free to visit whenever you wish. The Twin Kingdoms is always willing to welcome you.” As if to underscore her words, Margarita’s retinue all bowed as one.

“Thank you,” Zenjirou said shortly, intending to head right back to Capua.

Before he could, however, Margarita acted. “This, however, is me acting as an individual. It may not be much, but it may be of assistance in your future endeavors. I hope you will accept it.” As she spoke, she offered a plain iron bangle to him.

Zenjirou had awakened his sight to see mana, so he could tell at a glance that it was no mere accessory. It was a magic tool. One created by Margarita, a famed enchanter.

Zenjirou couldn’t help but be taken aback by receiving such an offer at the last minute.

“I could not possibly accept this,” he responded.

Margarita had an intent look on her face as she answered him. “Please reconsider. This is called the Windhammer. You place the hand it is on in front of you and say ‘*shun*’ in the language of magic to activate it. The effect is an instantaneous tempest. It is strong enough to push back even a mounted knight.”

The more he heard, the stronger it sounded. It was likely a unique artifact the woman had created. He couldn’t just take it, considering his fear of the implications.

However, Margarita seemed to understand his reluctance as she continued to explain. “Please forgive my rudeness, but your physical abilities are on par with women and children, Your Majesty. Despite that, you are one of only two users of teleportation magic on the continent. I would wager that you will have far more opportunities to travel to distant lands with only a few companions in the same way you traveled here. I hope that this Windhammer can protect you.”

“Hm...”

He had little room to refute her there. If it functioned as she had explained, it would certainly be useful for self-defense.

Having never pitted his life against another person, Zenjirou would be unable to even properly intimidate someone if he held a sword or spear. However, blowing his enemies away needed no real technique. It wouldn’t create any physical or more visceral feedback either, so he could use it without stress. His

position meant that his guards could rush over in the interim after he had defended himself.

“Still...” Despite all of that, he didn’t want to indebt himself to Margarita personally.

The princess offered a smile to dispel those concerns. “Perhaps you could consider being there for my sister as payment?”

A wary light came to life in his eyes at that. There was only one person Margarita would call “sister” in this context—Lucretia.

Before Zenjirou could refuse her, she continued.

“I would not demand that you surrender your heart to her desires. I simply hope for you to give her opportunities even there. Let’s say three. Meet with her three times without refusing her invitations. Anything else would depend on her efforts and your feelings.”

It was a concrete, limited promise. That might be acceptable.

Regardless of anything else, arguing the point here would only delay his return. He had specified an exact time he would return and Ines had already preceded him.

“Very well. I will happily accept this kindness from you,” he replied, pocketing the bangle. He certainly didn’t feel like putting it on then and there.

“Thank you. I look forward to seeing you again.” She bowed and stepped back, allowing some of the tension in the air to dissolve.

Staying any longer would tie him up in even more nuisances, and he would *gladly* avoid that.

“Farewell, then. My thanks once again, Princess Margarita. Eladio, I leave the rest here to you.” He finished up his farewells so that he could finally flee.

“Likewise, Your Majesty.”

“Of course, Sir Zenjirou.”

Once they had both responded, Zenjirou closed his eyes and began his enchantment for the last time. “*Send all things in the space that I envision to*

the place that I desire. As compensation, I offer—”

When he opened his eyes, he was greeted by the familiar room in Capua. Along with...

“Welcome home, Zenjirou.”

...his wife, having pushed her pregnant body to see him return. Ines was waiting behind her, still carrying the luggage.

The final bit of chaos had likely made her restless. There was a slight but visible—to Zenjirou, at least—hint of relief on her face.

“I am pleased to be back, Your Majesty,” he replied, keeping his tone formal for their initial greetings since other people were present.

Epilogue — The Next Steps

All of Zenjirou's goals in the Twin Kingdoms had been accomplished. Isabella, the healer, was staying in the royal palace until Aura gave birth, and he had been able to buy the cooling tools for Freya's room, where they were now installed.

While it was the active season, midday temperatures still soared to over thirty-five degrees, so the tools were greatly appreciated considering Freya's upbringing on the Northern Continent, and she had repeatedly spoken of her gratitude.

However, while his initial objectives had been fulfilled, there were matters that were not yet resolved, which had come up throughout his trip. They involved Talajeh of the Elementacatto family and Fiqriya of the Animeeum family.

Both were daughters of important noble families and had come to Capua. Lucretia Broglie would be joining them in around a month, having taken the land route. Isabella's presence meant that Aura could push herself much more than before, but she still had to admit that she was short-handed even so.

The night Zenjirou had returned, the queen and consort had sat opposite each other in the air-conditioned bedroom for a frank discussion.

"I would rather not, but I need to appoint a prime minister and marshal. However, merely making those appointments would do nothing but weaken the royal family. Therefore, I need to officially grant you a duchy. It will happen around the same time Lady Lucretia arrives."

The words sounded grave, but it was something he had already heard, so Zenjirou wasn't particularly surprised.

"Mm, got it. I more or less know who's going to be the marshal, but I'll ask anyway. Who are you appointing to the roles? Also, what specific title will I have?"

“As you have guessed, the marshal will be Pujol. As for the prime minister, that will be Viscount Regalado. You will be Duke Bilbo. The title comes with no territory, but it *is* an official title. You will have to attend more events as a duke than as just my representative.”

That would be an alluring proposition for someone after power. For someone like Zenjirou, though, it was an extra burden. That said, it was one he would take on for his wife.

“Right, Duke Bilbo. Got it. The main effect will be needing to attend more events without being there as your representative, right?”

The queen shook her head. “No. You will—at least in name—be the head of a ducal family linked to the royal family. In other words, the head of a branch family. Part of the palace will be designated as the Bilbo estate and belong to you. Official duties for Duke Bilbo will come to you in the future. Accompanying that will be approximately ten knights and a hundred soldiers who will be specifically assigned to you. A portion of the royal budget will be automatically assigned to the family, so their pay will come from that.”

“Urk, soldiers of my own,” he murmured, a frown marring his face. He would be the queen’s spouse and yet possess his own forces and money. He couldn’t honestly see it as a good thing. “Make sure you keep an eye on the money and men. Trust and blind faith are different things, after all.”

“I know,” Aura replied, unable to hold back a twisted smile at her husband explicitly saying that.

Despite his words about blind faith, Zenjirou couldn’t see himself going against Aura. The personal budget gave him a sudden realization, though.

“What about the maids in the inner palace? They’re technically mine rather than yours, right? Will their pay come out of that as well?”

Aura shook her head in response to his concern. “No, the inner palace belongs to the royal family. You stand at its head as the royal consort. The money comes from the royal family. I am the head of that family, and in that respect, you are my husband and a member of that family. You simultaneously head the Bilbo family, but that does not change your standing as a member of the royal family. Those expenses will fall to the main family as they have until

now.”

“I see...” It was a bit complex but not something he couldn’t understand. “It’s not going to cause an issue appointing Natalio as the mediator for the knights, right? I know him and would rather do that.”

Aura considered the question briefly before nodding. “Indeed. The Maldonado family is not quite highly ranked enough for such a role, but if that is what you desire, it will be no issue. However, you will need to take Natalio’s perspective into account when hiring any new knights. The Maldonado family has no noble rank, so hiring a marquis’s or count’s heir will likely cause friction.”

“Got it; I’ll make sure to discuss that with him. I’d like to borrow Fabio for those discussions.”

“He is rather busy at present. I apologize, but you will need to satisfy yourself with the second secretary, Alejandro.”

“Got it.”

A simple discussion between royals had seen Natalio go from a knight attached to the royal guard to the commander of Duke Bilbo’s knights. Aura’s consideration for her husband here would actually cause a fair deal of tumult within the knight’s family in the time to come. After all, since the end of the great war, opportunities for knights to make a name for themselves were few and far between.

In the midst of that, a new—albeit small—knight order had been formed and Natalio would have a big say in the selection for it. The Maldonado family, despite being nothing more than a simple knight family, would be inundated with knights dozens of times beyond its capacity and become the center of significant upheaval, but that is a story for another time.

Once his own rank had been fully discussed, Zenjirou questioned the name that had immediately preceded it.

“So, I know General Pujol, but I don’t think I’ve heard Viscount Regalado’s name before?”

The queen thought for a moment. “Ah, I have not yet explained in detail. I believe you will have met him several times within the palace. Viscount is not a

particularly high rank, but his family has a long history and a more important position than the title would indicate. He is not untalented and distances himself from Pujol. He has his idiosyncrasies, but he is a trustworthy person.”

“Hmm.”

From what she said, he seemed like a safe choice. Zenjirou had a strong feeling that it had been decided first and foremost based on Pujol’s own advancement.

“If you’re against General Pujol, what about Count Márquez or Margrave Gaziel?” Zenjirou asked.

Aura shrugged before disagreeing. “Regional lords are generally ineligible for posts in the palace. It is an unwritten rule that the benefits of the palace are for the nobles within it. The general before Pujol was an exception to that, but we were at war.”

“I see.”

It wasn’t to the same extent as the Twin Kingdoms, but it seemed that Capua had its own share of complexities and power balances.

“That is enough on those topics,” Aura said. “Zenjirou, I have a serious thing to discuss with you.”

The rest of the night’s discussion had seemed serious enough, but he didn’t feel like making that comment since Aura’s expression was very much the one she wore when acting as the queen.

“Right.”

Once he adjusted himself in his seat, Aura began.

“Princess Freya was able to buy the purifier she wished for. She was also granted the immensely powerful and unexpected Lulled Sea.”

“Yup,” Zenjirou agreed, nodding as the conversation moved along.

“As a result, she believes the intercontinental journey will be far safer. The chances of the *Glafir’s Leaf* getting into an accident are now one in ten thousand. However, the port of Valentia that we own has no one experienced in intercontinental travel. I cannot make that decision, but what are your

thoughts?”

“Hmm, I don’t know about one in ten thousand, but it’s definitely far less risky.”

“I see...” The queen fell silent for a while.

“Aura?” Zenjirou prompted her. It was a rare thing indeed for her to falter like this when she was speaking as the queen. His call seemed to bring her back from her thoughts and she took a deep breath before speaking.

“Zenjirou...would you accompany Princess Freya to the Northern Continent on the *Glasis’s Leaf*?”

There was a long silence as Zenjirou struggled to understand exactly what she was implying.

“Pardon?”



To be continued in *The Ideal Sponger Life* 11.

Appendix — The Lord and Maids' Home Renovation

The inner palace was considered, as a rule, to be a place closed to men. Other than its lord, that is.

That was true, but practically speaking, there were more occasions where men were allowed in than one might expect.

While the inner palace was indeed “a place,” it was also a building. General use of a building caused wear and tear, which meant it needed maintenance. Keeping men out even then would mean the country needed craftswomen. Female physicians would be required for emergencies, and the women would have to move the stone as well.

That was, in a word, unrealistic.

Therefore, while the general rule remained that men were forbidden from the inner palace, there were multiple exceptions. Today, Amanda had come to inform the remaining maids in the palace of one of those exemptions.

“There will be, from tomorrow onward, craftsmen coming and going within the inner palace for a period. I expect you all to be even more aware of yourselves than usual to not bring shame upon our establishment.”

“Yes, head maid.”

Satisfied at their response, Amanda nodded before continuing. “They are going to be constructing a sauna. This will be near the annex. Therefore, I expect you to be particularly diligent in cleaning around that annex and the gardens in the area. Understood?”

“Yes, head maid,” they chorused again.

“Your own appearance is, naturally, equally important. Ensure you bathe properly and your clothes are laundered. This is the blazing season, so ordinarily, a certain level of slack would be tacitly approved, but it will not be from tomorrow. You are to display the pride of maids of the inner palace.”

“Yes, head maid,” they repeated for a third time.

They were so in unison that one could be forgiven for thinking the response was mostly rote by this point. Taking it as the fruits of their training, Amanda nodded several times before giving her final warning.

“However, the most important thing to remember is that you must not wantonly appear around the men. We senior maids will be the ones predominately coordinating with them, so you should all keep out of their sight as much as possible. On the off chance that is unavoidable, you are not to speak and are to leave as soon as your role is fulfilled. Understood?”

“Huh? Then what’s the point in dressing up?” one of the maids murmured.

“You there!” Amanda exclaimed, sharp eyes pivoting her way. “Did you have something to say?!”

“No, head maid!”

Any other muttering was well and truly stifled.



The next day saw, as planned, a profusion of new people appearing within the inner palace. They wore rough shirts and pants dirtied from work over well-built bodies.

The group was around a dozen people, all men. There were carpenters, masons, blacksmiths, and laborers. All of them were types who would normally never be allowed within the inner palace.

Particularly attention-grabbing was the tall man in the center, surveying the area. Part of that was due to his height, being half a head taller than any of the men around him, but the main reason was a more fundamental aspect of his appearance. He had light brown hair and gray-blue eyes. While the Southern Continent’s sun had tanned his skin past being mistaken for “white,” it was visibly a shade different from that of a Capuan.

The man was one of the Sveans, a sailor on the ship Freya had helmed from the far north. While the sailors on the *Glafir’s Leaf* obviously made their livings through either sailing itself or as warriors, there were a surprising number of

people with other talents in the crew.

There were many dangers to long sea voyages. Frankly, it was a job where you could easily die. That meant they were always recruiting. The people who took up such positions were often from sailing families, but just as many were second or third sons who could not take up their own family's trade.

Nicolai was a perfect example of that. He was one of those with alternative skills. Aiding his family earlier in life meant that he knew how to build a sauna from scratch.

Naturally, that claim wouldn't allow him access to the inner palace in and of itself. He had needed to make a prototype outside before being granted permission to enter the inner palace.

The man's head pivoted this way and that before he spoke. "So, we want it over by that building, right? Is there a water source? Saunas don't take as much water as a bathhouse, but they still need it. Plus we'll need a cold bath, since you gotta take a dip in one when you're outta the sauna. A natural pond or winter snow'd be better, but that ain't happening around here."

A native craftsman, advanced enough in age to be called elderly, put a hand to his chin as he answered. "As far as ponds are concerned, there's the fountain in the garden. If we want a water source, though, the bath draws water from a central source and automatically fills and drains when the dividers are removed. It'd be a fair bit of time and effort, but we could set up the same thing here. The only other water source would be the well. Women are usually the only ones around, so we'd rather not force them to haul water from there."

As you could gather from the man's immediate, fluent explanation of the environment, this was one of the royal family's engineers. The knowledge of the two palaces' blueprints, water supply, wall thickness, and so on was all crammed into his gray-haired head, so he was required to live within the royal palace. It was an awfully restricted life.

While part of the reason for his age was due to the time and dedication it took to gather all the knowledge and expertise his position required, that wasn't all. It was also because an older man's weaker legs meant that it wouldn't be as much of a hardship to be restricted in his movements as it might

be for a younger man. There was also the rather harsh perspective that someone his age wouldn't last too long anyway, so it would be best for confidentiality's sake.

In the *truly* harsh countries, people with such classified knowledge would lose more than just their job when the time came, so Capua's treatment was actually relatively progressive.

"Yeah, not the best job to foist off on the women. Definitely can't get the girls of the inner palace to do it."

"Be different if it were my wife."

"You got that right."

While the older workers were chattering away, the younger men were looking around uncomfortably. That was hardly a surprise. This was the inner palace. While Zenjirou was well at home there, it was the most mysterious place in the country—somewhere a normal person would likely never tread. It was a space forbidden to men other than Zenjirou, so they felt out of place even in the gardens.

The youths' roving looks finally caught sight—albeit distantly—of something.

"Ah?!"

"They're there!"

"For real?!"

Three of the young maids had just caught the gazes of the young workers as they hurried past to fulfill their duties. They had likely noticed the men in turn. They stopped briefly in surprise before offering an almost encouraging wave in the men's direction.

A roar went up from the men.

"They were looking at me!"

"Don't be an idiot—it was me. The only reason you can even think that's 'cause you've never seen your own face."

"Shut it. Move, already; I can't see!"

They'd started making a racket, forgetting their place. Since Zenjirou had essentially been royalty from the moment he had stepped into this world, he likely didn't see things the same way as the locals. However, apart from a few exceptions, the maids were all daughters of nobles. And they weren't "just nobility" either. Their upbringing, personalities, and even appearances had led them to be selected as "appropriate for the inner palace."

In other words, they were almost literal flowers on peaks far beyond the commoners' grasps. Seeing them, even from a distance, and having them smile and wave would almost inevitably set the men off.

However, this was the inner palace, a place ordinarily barred to them. Being allowed an exception to that rule did *not* mean they could cause a commotion over the maids.

"Hey! What do you think you're playing at?!" the older man demanded, his voice stronger than his aged appearance would have suggested.

They yelped.

"B-Boss! We were just..."

The youths came back to themselves, even if it was a little late. But their boss wasn't going to let them off so easily.

"You fools!"

The younger men all took blows to the head hard enough that you could practically see the sparks fly.



As for the young maids who had been the cause of the outburst, they were currently receiving karma—or at least a long lecture from Amanda.

"How are you three so thoughtless? I told you time and again that you needed to take the longer route today. Your laziness causes these issues."

Weathering the unceasing lecture with suitable expressions and hunched shoulders were the three problem maids: Faye, Dolores, and Letti.

The craftsmen would be present around the annex today, so they had been told to take the longer route when walking outside to avoid contact with the

visitors as much as possible. However, the problem maids, living up to their moniker, had taken a shortcut, allowing themselves to be seen.

Their apologies came in turn.

“We apologize.”

“We were in the wrong.”

“It won’t happen again.”

Their expressions certainly appeared regretful, and their voices were feeble, but Amanda wouldn’t let herself be taken in by it to offer them sympathy. She knew the girls were not chagrined in the slightest. They had just perfected the skill of *looking* so and letting the lecture wash over them. The only way she had of correcting their behavior was a physical approach.

She had spoken to the craftsmen about something that would serve this punishment perfectly. Therefore, she decided to delegate the task to the girls in front of her.

“Very well. You will be demonstrating that regret through your actions. Am I understood?” she asked with a sweet smile.

The three knew that couldn’t mean anything good for them. Still, they had no right to refuse.

“You are.”

“We understand.”

“Of course.”

Despite their strained expressions, the trio could only agree.

That evening, their premonitions were fulfilled with backbreaking work.

“Hup. And that’s—”

“Less than half.”

While Faye and Dolores had the breath to talk, Letti’s breath was coming in halting gasps. They had been required to fill a simple wooden bath near the annex with water from the well.

The bath was a long rectangle built of wood. It was a model of the bath that would be built next to the sauna. Of course, the actual construction would be made from stone and half-buried in the ground; this was merely to judge the size and amount of water it would require.

It was too fragile for someone to actually use, so there would be no one bathing in it, but it could at least be filled for testing purposes.

It was much smaller than the huge bath in the inner palace proper, but filling it with water was still closer to torture than work.

“We’re...never...going...to mana...ge...this...every...day!” Faye complained.

“Right!” Dolores replied.

She and Faye were doing better, while Letti was still gasping for breath and couldn’t even speak properly, being the least fit of the three of them. Her light brown hair was plastered to her forehead with sweat, almost seductively.

Why were they doing this? The biggest reason was the issue that afternoon, but there was a more practical reason as well. The sauna was being built for Freya, who would soon be taking over the annex, as a cultural homage to her home country. However, adding new furnishings was not such a simple process. The sauna and attached bath called for a large amount of water. It was a given that transporting water to a place that had not previously required it was not an easy undertaking.

Channels were normally excavated between the palace’s water sources and the baths by calculating the amount of water needed and the difference in elevation.

Magic was a part of this world, so the actual excavation was made much easier by way of earth manipulation, but automatically filling and draining baths was a major undertaking nonetheless.

If the water supply could be eliminated, the construction would be far simpler. That was actually the norm. Filling a bath via bucket was hard labor, but part of that was because it was three women doing so. For a large man—or ten—it wouldn’t be worth remarking on.

Even if they hired laborers each day, it wouldn’t be enough to make much of a

dent in the coffers, but this was the inner palace, so only women would normally be within it. With the various checks required for them, it wasn't easy to simply increase their numbers either. That was why the craftsmen had discounted the idea to begin with. It would add to the time and effort—and therefore budget—but their only choice was the plumbing system.

Amanda had suggested that they try out the manual approach once to be sure. The results were visible at a glance. Things were just as bad as expected.

The evening had passed and the sun was well below the horizon when the three maids stood over the moon's brightening reflection in the now-filled bath.

Faye and Dolores were breathing raggedly, while Letti was on the verge of passing out. She had practically given up entirely for the latter half of the job and made a single trip in the time it had taken Faye to make three. Still, the other two hadn't complained both because Letti usually picked up the slack when they were cooking and because their relationship was so strong.

Either way, the three had finished their punishment and could hear crisp footsteps making their way closer. They knew who it was just from the sound. They would normally have leaped up immediately, but they didn't have the energy left to do so.

The person in question—Amanda—stood in front of the three collapsed maids and spoke. “Good work. Judging from your state, it would seem the work is too much to push on the maids.”

She wasn't devilish enough to scold them for their slovenly appearance and demand that they stand up straight. Still, even the thanks was barely enough to make them raise their heads.

“Lady Amanda...we can't...”

“It's too hard...”

Such statements from the two to the head maid took considerable courage, but the work had simply been that hard. Even Amanda seemed to feel somewhat guilty about it, but she cleared her throat to deflect those feelings before continuing, unconcerned.

“Creating new waterways will inevitably lead to construction taking longer. In

other words, the men will be around the inner palace for longer. The only way to shorten that would be to forgo those channels. I will admit that if the other maids here were not as careless as you were today, I could suggest them even if it would lead to the time frame increasing.”

There was an unspoken question laced into her words, although it was more of a *threat* than a question.

“I-It will be fine!”

“We won’t be so careless again!”

“W-We’re sorry...”

Faye and Dolores had already regained the energy to speak, and even Letti managed to muster the wherewithal to respond to that.

The job had been effective for its purpose, it seemed. While she felt like it may have been slightly excessive, Amanda decided to take it as a success.

“Then I shall deal with the cleanup. You have done enough today. Once you recover, you can return to your rooms. Oh, do not forget to eat and bathe, even if you are tired or it will impact your work tomorrow.”

“Right.”

“Thank you...”

Letti just managed a noise, her earlier energy now spent.

The three of them leaned back thankfully and waited to recover.



About a month passed after those pitiful events. The ceaseless work of the craftsmen—helped in no small part by a generous infusion of labor from earth magic users—had seen the sauna and cold bath completed.

The bath would fill with water when the partition was removed, and it could be uncorked to drain. The sauna itself was tightly sealed to keep the hot air inside. The building’s wooden construction made it stand out somewhat from the surrounding stone buildings, but that was a nice touch to symbolize the induction of a new piece of culture.

The sailor from the *Glafir's Leaf* had signed off on it, but that wasn't the be-all-end-all of the project. Freya would be the one to use it in the future. Until then, Zenjirou and Aura were the two who could avail themselves. They were all-important figures in the country, almost without peer.

It had happened in the same way with Zenjirou's initial success at making soap, but once something was completed, it needed to be verified as being safe. Therefore, the maids had a new job: to test the sauna.

The inside of the building was home to a U-shaped bench, which was a protrusion at a comfortable height for sitting. It took up every wall apart from the entrance. There were two burners at the center of the cramped room and two in the corners. There was a wooden ladle that could be used to splash the heating stones on the burners to steam up the area.

There were several layers of cloth along the seating for added comfort, and you could even lie down on them if the fancy took you. There was also a sturdy pedestal right in the middle of the room for oil lamps to use as a light source. The room had no windows to keep the steam in, and this was how they were dealing with the lack of illumination. This time, though, they were using one of Zenjirou's LED lamps.

Not even the blazing season could compare to the heat and humidity of the sauna, and the maids were slumped and soaked in their own sweat, covered in a single wrap of cloth.

"So hot..." came the complaint from Faye, the first to speak up.

"I'd call it intense..." Dolores teased from her side. Still, Dolores wasn't particularly at home in the environment either.

"It's...hard to breathe..." Letti managed from her position elsewhere on the seat. Her full chest was heaving up and down as if she wasn't getting enough oxygen. While Capuans were used to a certain level of both heat and humidity, there were limits.

Faye turned to the girl opposite her. Her friend's expression hadn't even faltered.

"You look the same as usual, Louisa. Aren't you hot?"

The black-haired-and-eyed girl answered her senior's question dully. "I can feel the heat. However, I have been trained, so this is still within my tolerance limit." Her posture underlined her claim, as she was sitting with a straight back.

At her side, Mirella was practically the opposite. "You're inc...redible," she said. "I'm imp...ressed."

Mirella was struggling even more than Letti, unable to get full words out. She seemed to be particularly vulnerable to the sauna. Actually, she seemed to have a relatively low tolerance for anything unpleasant at all.

Dolores, sitting opposite the girl, gave her a kind reminder. "Mirella, you know you don't need to push yourself, right? If it gets too much for you, head to the other room. There's a cold bath waiting for you there."

Mirella smiled, shaking her damp hair from her face as she answered. "Thank you."

The majority of the maids were nobles. The current exceptions were Louisa and Margarete, along with the head of cleaning, Ines. Even so, there was an indelible hierarchy among the noble maids.

Mirella was from the highest-ranking family among them. She was the niece of Count Márquez—a particularly influential noble—and had lost her parents in the war, so she had been brought up in the family proper. The manners drilled into her were the perfect embodiment of high-class nobility. Of course, being from a high-ranked family did not *necessarily* correspond to well-drilled manners.

"It's hot, isn't it?" asked Nilda, a bright smile of enjoyment on her sweat-streaked face. She was next to Mirella, opposite Letti, and hailed from the Gaziel family as the head's second daughter. In terms of rank, her family was on par with the Márquez family. Moreover, Nilda was not the family head's niece, but his daughter. There was no one more highly placed in the inner palace.

At a push, Viscount Regalado's daughter would be on the same level. However, influence and tradition aside, the family was that of a mere viscount, so overall, Nilda would be ranked higher.

Despite this, while her father was indeed the margrave, her mother was an

ordinary villager. Nilda herself had been raised as a commoner until she was eight, so her manners were likely the least refined of anyone in the room. In fact, she had broken conventions on several occasions since entering the inner palace. The fact that no one particularly disliked her in spite of that was practically a talent of its own. Because she was who she was, no one pulled her up on acting and speaking through her emotions.

“Sorry, I can’t take anymore,” Nilda said finally, staggering to her feet. The others exchanged looks before joining her with a smile.

“I’ll come with you.”

“Likewise.”

“Well, if the younglings are going, I guess I’ll follow along.”

“There’s no need to force ourselves to stay.”

“Yup, let’s get out.”

The maids traipsed out from the sauna behind Nilda. Waiting behind the door was a tub full of cold water. The young maids jostled each other in an effort to be first, jumping in and letting out happy yells.

“Guh, that’s great!”

“Indeed it is.”

“I feel like I’m alive again.”

“I quite agree. The waste from our sweat is being washed away, and I feel like a new woman.”

“I can understand why Princess Freya’s country is so fond of the custom.”

“This is wonderful.”

Faye dunked her entire head under, but no one there would chide her for it. That was just how pleasant the cold water was after reaching their limit in the steam.

All of them now had reinvigorated expressions. Even Louisa’s usually blank face was home to a slight smile.

The maids spent a while washing off the sweat in the cold water. The problem

was that everyone present was new to saunas. Therefore, every one of them made the common mistake of first-timers:

“It’s cold.”

“I’m freezing.”

“I can’t feel my fingers.”

“I can feel my temperature dropping. My capabilities are doing the same.”

“Yup, we stayed in here too long.”

“Aha ha, my body’s freezing.”

That was, of course, staying too long in the cold bath and letting the chill permeate their bodies. But correcting the mistake was surprisingly simple.

“Let’s warm up again, then.”

“That’s probably the only option.”

“Agreed.”

“Indeed. Next time, we should ensure that we moderate our time for cooling off.”

“True. Embarrassingly enough, I will be joining you.”

“Yay! We’re all together.”

The girls all willingly headed back to the room they’d previously fled.



Several days had passed since the inner palace was furnished with the sauna. The young maids were completely hooked. Sweating in the sauna and washing off the heat in the water...then, once they were cold, jumping back into the sauna and repeating the process without chilling themselves too much...

Some of them, however, had started using it differently. Some began by using the cold bath. It could be considered a clever plan, in fact. After all, Capua was on the Southern Continent and currently in the midst of the blazing season. The temperature was easily over thirty-five degrees even at night. The humidity was high as well, so the weather was like a milder sauna. Therefore, cooling off first

made a certain amount of sense.

The problem maids had taken things a step further to make another discovery: iced juice, shaved ice, and ice cream were even better if you had them after you'd steamed yourself in the sauna.

There was a problem, though. The freezer that Zenjirou had brought was fairly big, being a five-door model. Still, it had its limits, and regardless, its owners were Zenjirou and Aura.

Zenjirou was currently in the Twin Kingdoms, but the maids still didn't use the freezer much more than usual. Each maid could therefore only eat so much ice and ice cream. Unfortunately, that amount was not enough to satisfy their new cravings.

So the three put their heads together. The delicious ice cream existed, and they wanted to eat more of it. They pondered the solution for a while before coming upon one surprisingly easily.

There wasn't enough for the three of them. One person eating the portions meant that they'd have three times the amount. Faye and Dolores were usually fairly unreserved to begin with, but even Letti was rather unyielding when it came to food. Therefore, the three of them were having an endurance match in the sauna with their combined portion of ice cream on the line.

Their juniors watched them oddly as the three remained utterly silent.

"Um, I will be heading out first," said Milagros, tilting her head and blinking her slanted eyes before standing.

Slightly taken aback by the lack of response to their roommate, Manora and Monica exchanged glances before speaking.

"Um, Faye?"

"Letti, we'd like to head out first."

Faye usually doted on Manora—one of the few girls who was smaller than her—and Letti had a good relationship built on a mutual love for and sharing of nice food with Monica. However, their usually kind—albeit eccentric—seniors remained serious and nonspeaking. They were essentially trying to minimize

even the smallest expenditure of energy but hadn't told their compatriots.

Feeling somewhat guilty about their younger colleagues standing there awkwardly, Dolores waved her hand to say they could leave. However, due to her odd expression and being slumping against the wall, it looked more like she was chivvying them out.

"O-Our apologies."

"Excuse us."

"In a while."

The three of them jostled past each other to get out of the room. The problem maids were left alone in silence.

None of them were trying to verbally provoke each other, but there was a heavy tension between the three. They were all firmly convinced that they'd be the last woman standing. Regardless, they had both physical and mental limits.

The first to reach hers was Dolores.

"Phwah, no more."

She was the calmest and most rational of the three, so it was all but inevitable that she would be the first to drop out. Pushing herself any further could make her ill, she'd decided, so she headed for the bath.

"You should both call it quits soon. I won't mock you," she said before leaving.

Faye and Letti were now the only ones left. Faye was still there out of stubbornness, while Letti was there due to greed, neither being able to stand. Sweat trickled down their bodies as they spared each other glances.

Their stalemate was eventually challenged unexpectedly. The door thumped open as someone entered the room.

"Oh, you're both still here?" asked Amanda, appearing from nowhere. The two stiffened immediately and let out noises of shock. The younger maids were certainly not the only ones using the sauna. Amanda and the other heads also used it.

The two came to an understanding by exchanging looks. This wasn't a

situation in which to fight. They needed to get their stories straight and leave before Amanda started questioning them.

“Sorry, we overstayed a little,” Letti said. “Come on, Faye.” She stood to divert Amanda’s attention.

Faye tried to follow. “Right... Huh...?”

“Faye?!”

“Faye?! What’s wrong? Can you hear me? Faye?!”

Faye blacked out. The next thing she saw was the familiar ceiling of the living room in the inner palace.

“Huh? Where...”

A familiar voice speaking in an unfamiliarly soft tone answered her uncomprehending murmurs. “Thank goodness, you came around.”

“R... Right. Lady Amanda?!”

She immediately moved to sit up, but Amanda put a hand gently on top of her.

“You shouldn’t get up just yet. You might not remember, but you passed out in the sauna.”

That was what finally prompted Faye to understand the situation she was in. She was currently lying on a sofa in the living room, her head resting—of all places—on Amanda’s lap. Amanda was speaking in a tone softer than Faye had ever heard from her as she stroked her hair.



“What a disaster. I know it is our duty to test how it should be used before our lords and ladies could, but you went above and beyond the call of duty there, Faye.”

“Ah...”

She could more or less understand what was happening. Amanda thought that Faye had been using the sauna normally and then fainted.

“I had half expected it, but it would appear the sauna can cause us to swoon in much the same way as a hot bath if we remain in there for too long. Princess Freya knows how to use it, so that may be another matter, but perhaps we should ask Her Majesty and Sir Zenjirou to refrain from using it for a while.”

“Ah, right...”

Amanda gently handed a cup to Faye as the maid offered her half-hearted answer.

“Here, this is fruit juice. Do you think you can drink it? There’s ice in there, so take care.”

“Th-Thank you.”

She was done for if the truth came out. Faye was well aware that she had collapsed due to her own stupidity, but she had to keep her expression in check and avoid pulling a face at Amanda’s kindness.

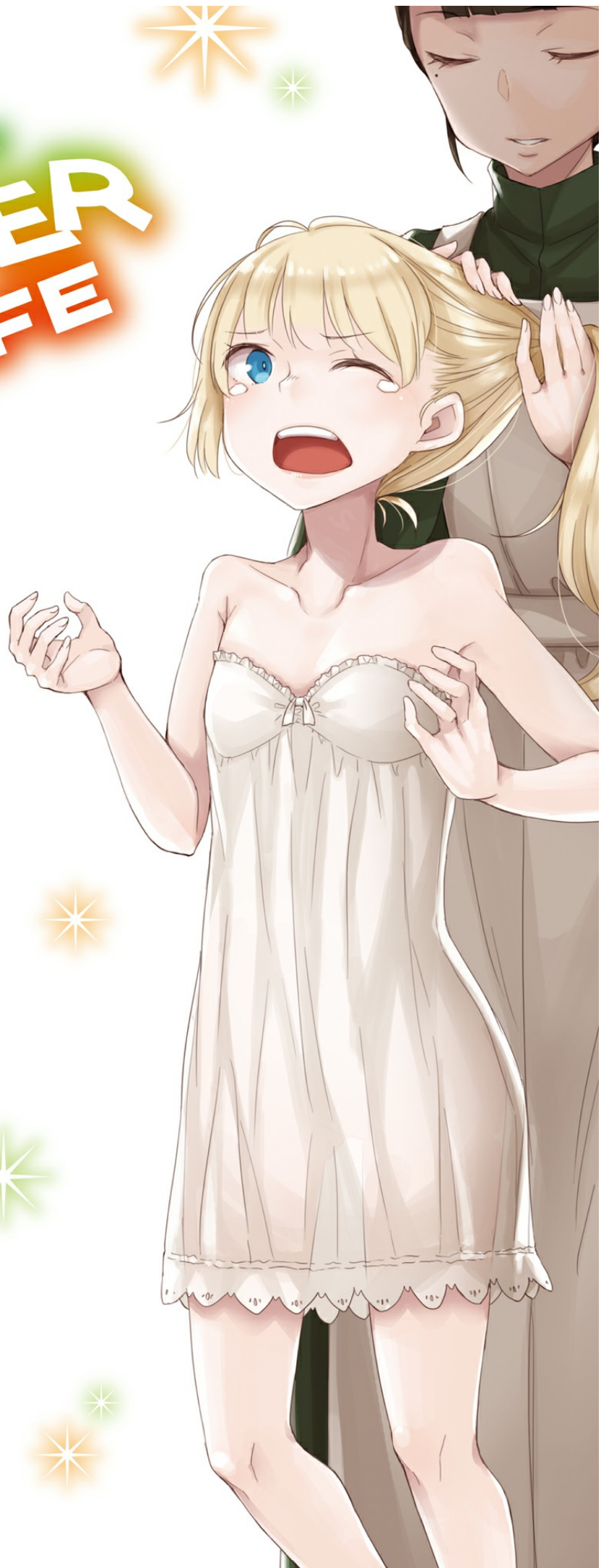
THE IDEAL SPONGER LIFE

10

She pulled at
Lucretia's hair,
tugging it into
a side ponytail.

Illustrator:
**Jyuu
Ayakura**

Author:
**Tsunehiko
Watanabe**



With no
warning,
another
figure had
appeared.

“May I offer
you a hand in
welcome, Your
Highness?”

A detailed anime-style illustration of a young woman with blonde hair styled in a high ponytail with a side braid. She has large, expressive blue eyes and a gentle smile. She is wearing a purple, form-fitting, long-sleeved dress with a draped neckline and a small gold necklace with a blue pendant. The background is a soft, warm-toned interior with vertical light patterns. Sparkling light effects are scattered around the text and the character.

Margarita Sharou.
Though young, she
was among the
most accomplished
enchanters of
her age.



Zenjirou
could tell
at a glance
that it was
no mere
accessory.

**“I could
not
possibly
accept
this.”**

As she
spoke, she
offered a
plain iron
bangle to
him.

**“I hope it
can be of
assistance
in your
future
endeavors.
I hope
you will
accept
it.”**



“ ”
“ ”
“ ”
The three women
didn't speak,
remaining shut
away in the
sauna...

Faye and Dolores were
usually fairly unreserved
to begin with, but even
Letti was surprisingly
unyielding when it
came to food.

Thus, the fate of their
combined portion of ice
cream was to be decided
through an endurance
competition in the sauna.

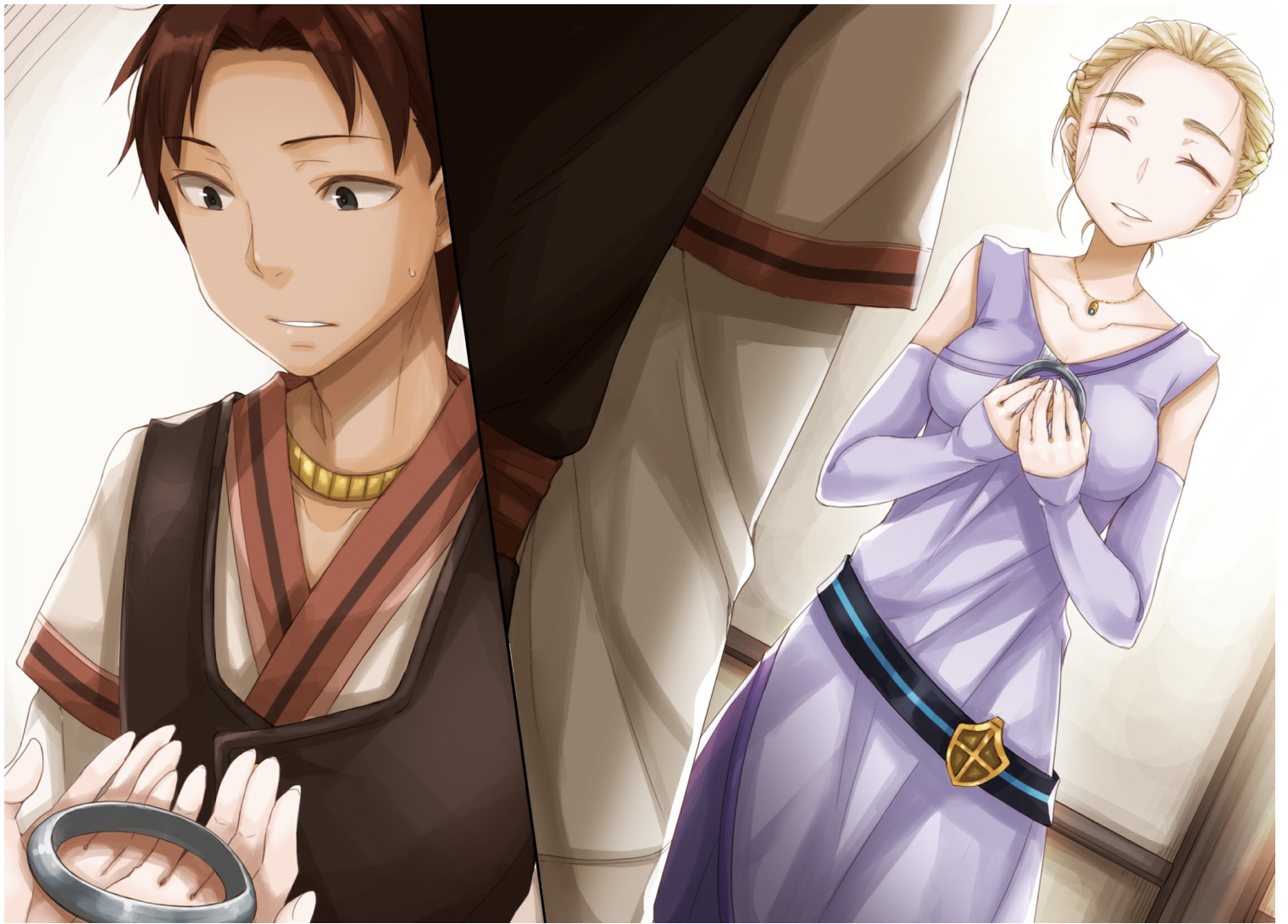
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THE
IDEAL
SPONGER
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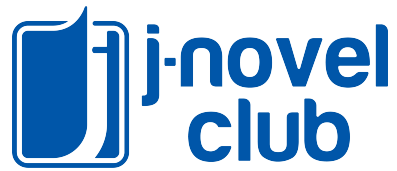












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RISOU NO HIMOSEIKATSU

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